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Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

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Abstract

One of the earliest novels set in Ireland to achieve popular and critical acclaim was Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800). It is reported that King George III got great entertainment in reading this short novel, which relates the rambunctious genealogy of the various squires who were lords of Castle Rackrent as narrated by the family retainer, Thady Quirk. The delighted King is said to have declared: 'I know something now of my Irish subjects'. It is this issue of knowing, specifically knowing the Irish subject that is the focus of this article, and the argument is made that knowledge and the processes of identification in the novel are ultimately made unintelligible by the gap between the different standards and practices of oral and literary cultures. To call the narrator, Thady Quirk, an unreliable narrator, fails at marking how fundamentally his narration undermines every convention of the realist novel. This article argues that *Castle Rackrent* is best understood owing a profound debt to the virtuoso oral performance of Anglo-Gaelic culture.

Keywords

Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, Realism, Oral Culture

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Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

One of the earliest novels set in Ireland to achieve popular and critical acclaim was Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800). It is reported that King George III himself got great entertainment in reading this short novel, which relates the rambunctious genealogy of the various squires who were lords of Castle Rackrent as narrated by the family retainer, Thady Quirk. The delighted King is said to have: '...rubbed his hands & said "what what - I know something now of my Irish subjects"'.¹ "[W]hat what" echoes the case to hand: it is this issue of knowing, specifically knowing the Irish subject that is the focus of this article, and the argument is made that knowledge and the processes of identification in the novel are ultimately made unintelligible by the gap between the different standards and practices of oral and literary cultures. To call the narrator, Thady Quirk, an unreliable narrator, fails at marking how fundamentally his narration undermines every convention of the realist novel. This article argues that *Castle Rackrent* is best understood owing a profound debt to the virtuoso oral performance of Anglo-Gaelic culture.² The term 'Anglo-Gaelic' is my own, Edgeworth uses the term 'Hibernian' to refer to this tale and Hiberno-English is the term used to describe the kind of spoken English that is heavily influenced by the Irish language.³ I coin the neologism 'Anglo-Gaelic' to underscore the strangeness of the text that is *Castle Rackrent*, which strains with the paraphernalia of Enlightenment rationale as a frame and medium for Thady's Gaelic *Ancien Regime* account of his loyalty to his masters. The text is ultimately Quirk-y and might be most fruitfully read as part of a genealogy of Irish texts that detonate the form of the novel with the vociferousness of the Hiberno-English voice in performance, containing most notably, the later novels of James Joyce, Beckett's trilogy, and the oeuvre of Flann O'Brien.

It is difficult to find a literary historian of the Irish novel who has not produced a reading Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, and while outright disagreement has not been pointedly expressed by academics about the various evaluations of the merit of

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

this short novel, interpretations of the meanings of *Castle Rackrent* differ widely. Is the novel's 'apparent nostalgia'⁴ for the decline of a native Irish ruling family, or is it 'the brilliant requiem for the Protestant Nation'⁵, or does the novel expose 'the hypocrisies, improvidences, and trajectory of ascendancy decline'⁶? Does *Castle Rackrent* tell the story of the rise of the Catholic bourgeoisie who by the end of the nineteenth-century will control the political life of Ireland⁷ or the story of the 'afflicted Irish peasant' who will 'revolt and revolt again'⁸? Does Maria Edgeworth support the colonial system in presenting Thady as being 'backward, Irish and comic' and the Edgeworths as 'forwardlooking, English, and serious sociological students of Irish life'⁹ or does she critique the colonial system by presenting Thady's 'devious and false servility [as] a direct product of the colonial system, and [is he] destined, through his crucial aid for his son, to be its nemesis.'¹⁰ Is *Castle Rackrent* one of the more blatant examples of the imperious voice of the coloniser¹¹ or is *Castle Rackrent* a '...novel of the last, confident days of the Irish Independency, though ...the Union of 1800 already seemed a bitter and inevitable necessity, [which] darken[s] the novelist's own view of her novel.'¹² Is the novel concerned with a didactic 'responsibility to inform', a 'myopic' prescription of 'the Edgeworth recipe' for enlightened landlordism.¹³ Is *Castle Rackrent* 'certainly.... a critique of patriarchy'¹⁴ or is it that 'the tale as a whole is at odds with itself, and at odds with Maria'.¹⁵

Cultural critics and literary historians largely read *Castle Rackrent* as if it is a novel of literary realism, an historical novel or novel that has a clearly focused political agenda.¹⁶ Declan Kiberd who insightfully reads *Castle Rackrent* as destroying 'the epistemological foundations – of realism and science' ultimately reads this as a critique on those Enlightenment values on which the Act of Union was based.¹⁷ In the practice of reading and critiquing *Castle Rackrent* the difficulty for these critics is in deciding the correct spatio-temporal space; the correct political and social setting for the novel, in order to decide who it is that inhabits the castle and who it is that they

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

are looking out on.¹⁸ It is the function of the form of the realist/historical novel to enact the processes of socialization, that is the ways that individuals become part of the society. Hegel was among the first to notice this function of the realist novel. He describes how the novel in the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century incorporates a heterogeneous flux of social materials to form a bourgeois epic, where the diverse elements of a social reality are integrated to mirror and repeat rites of passage from individuality to social integration.¹⁹

Georg Lukács' reading of Walter Scott as the first historical novelist shows how Scott enacted the civilizing process to narrate the passage from past savagery to present civility.²⁰ Historical novels are thus equated with social realism to the extent that they both not only present a reality, enact a mimesis, they involve the readers in participating in a movement from a disruptive verisimilitude of possibilities to a point of definite stability. This dialogical process of identification means that a hierarchy of values is assimilated and a demarcation is formed, a boundary between what is acceptable and unacceptable. What cannot be drawn into identity (beyond the Pale) is either deviant, dissident or disappeared.²¹ There is not only a mimetic function inscribed in the form of the realist novel but there is the inscription of the "moral school" where the characters are formed as ethical subjects and readers of this literature are required to repeat the educational process undergone by the novels' protagonists.

Cultural critics have read realist/historical novels to decode this inscription of ideological values. Fiction provides a contained site for the interrogation of the strategies involved in the validation of ideology; in that ideology's assumptions and presumptions to universal, a-historical essentialist truth can be seen to belong to specific cultural contexts and circumstances. The temporal causality of realist fiction can be read to reveal ideology as a temporal construct but this creation of reality

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

involves a regulation of multifarious perspectives and the conflicting readings of *Castle Rackrent* shows that Edgeworth does not achieve this regulation. According to David Lloyd this point is not particular to *Castle Rackrent* but to the genre of Irish nineteenth-century realist novels: 'One of the problems of the Irish (nineteenth-century) novel, precisely insofar as it conforms to the symbolic mode of realism, is the sheer volume of inassimilable residue that it can neither properly contain nor entirely exclude.'²² The following reading of *Castle Rackrent* follows the more recent interpretations made by Claire Connolly and Clíona Ó Gallchoir who both focus on how the voice of Thady 'an illiterate old steward' who 'tells the story of the Rackrent family in his vernacular idiom'²³ undermines the genre of the realistic novel. Connolly says that '*Castle Rackrent* does not ask its readers to confront the difference of the Irish language, then, but registers instead its inflections on spoken English in Ireland' and she declares, following Eric Cheyfitz, that the 'untranslatability' of Thady's voice into an Enlightenment narrative is a testament to *Castle Rackrent's* commitment to recording the 'difficult politics' of 'cross-cultural communications under colonial conditions.'²⁴ Ó Gallchoir's reading shows how Thady's narration undermines the concept of writing as being shaped by the logic of either aesthetic or ideological concerns of the rational public sphere, she proposes that we understand *Castle Rackrent* as expressing scepticism on the ability of the literate public to discern between truth and falsity.²⁵

Joep Leersen has used Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the pre-realist novel and more specifically his term 'chronotope' to discuss the nineteenth-century Irish novel.²⁶ 'Chronotope' is a place of 'in-between time' an enclave of the continuous past, what Bakhtin calls 'adventure time' and as if to emphasize *Castle Rackrent's* non-realist alignment there are three places in the text where *Castle Rackrent* is inexplicably referred to as *Castle Stopgap*, on another occasion it is called *Rackrent Gap*, Sir Kit is announced as *Sir Kit Stopgap* and in another instance his wife is called lady

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

Stopgap.²⁷ 'Stopgap', a connotation of absence rather than a denotation of presence, is one of those words so potent with allusions that literary critics can spend forests of paper unwrapping its affects. One sense of 'Stopgap' is 'that thing which stops or fills the gap'. A contrary sense of 'Stopgap' is 'no time, no place' contained in the implication of the full 'stop' as the end of time and the no place of 'gap' as the empty space between two places. Stopgap thus contains within itself a movement between the materiality of that thing which punctuates time and space, and the immaterial beyond the edges of time and space. 'Stopgap' can sound as a warning to 'mind-the-gap', to avoid the void. 'Stopgap' might be a call to stop-up-the-gap, to fill the absence with what matters.

In tune with the contrary spin of 'Stopgap' Edgeworth surrounded the tale of *Castle Rackrent* with editorial paratext including a title page, preface, copious footnotes, closing advertisement to the English reader and a 'glossary' which is in fact a very long editorial commentary on sundry aspects and (un)related matters of the text. The thrust of the editorial interventions is to make the tale of the Rackrents less strange for the English reader, to fill in the gaps, but the result is a consistent demonstration of Edgeworth's authorial anxiety. In her preface Edgeworth exhibits a Hegelian desire for the 'end of History' in the union of all the dialectics that distinguish (oppositional) identity: '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.' She is at pains to claim that this tale of 'the manners of a certain class of the gentry of Ireland some years ago' is a tale of former times and that there is no such 'class of the gentry' as the Rackrents to be found in the Ireland of 1800. But in the passage where she makes this claim there is a change in tense, and we move from the present tense statements: '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

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

since been extinct in Ireland’, to the future tense statements: ‘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.’²⁸ The impression left with the reader is that Edgeworth, who has assumed an identity of a male Editor, wishes that his/her own desires for a negation of that ‘certain class of gentry’ has come into reality. The ‘here’ and ‘now’ that signifies the praxis of everyday life is replaced by the ‘there’ and ‘then’ and ‘will’ signification of the not-really-real. This desire to claim as historical what has yet not come to pass is underlined by the fact that the Union of 1800 was being referred to as a foregone conclusion almost a year before it came into being.²⁹ The preface also makes a devastating critique of writings by what she unnervingly calls ‘...the professed historian’:

they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness or heroism, to sympathise in their fate... 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 technology of writing itself is suspect: ‘those who are used to literary manufacture know how much is often sacrificed to the rounding of a period, or the pointing of an antithesis.’ The remarkable claim is made that Thady’s narration, dictated to the writer who is a faithful recorder of this voice, ‘with all the minute prolixity of detail of a gossip in a country town’ has a superior claim to veracity in being unmediated by the strictures and constrictions of textual standards.³⁰

Identity in *Castle Rackrent* is not defined in terms of a sectarian division of ethnicity, religion or even class. The instability of signifiers to signified is rampant throughout

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

this short tale. We can be sure of no one's identity because there is such a fertile proliferation of distinguishing characteristics that many significant details which might seem to locate a particular attribute quite often coexist with another depiction or description which causes complications, confusion or contradictions. One case in point is the ambivalence of apostasy and crypto-conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism that haunt the text. It is never clear what religion the owners of the estate espouse, the genealogy of the surnames: O'Shaughlin/Stopgap/Rackrent/Quirk leaves no sure footing as to the religious, social or political identities or allegiances of 'the family'. According to the Penal Code of eighteenth-century Ireland, the O'Shaughlin/Stopgap/Rackrents must have been Protestant or at least nominally Protestant in order to be eligible to inherit the Rackrent Estate though instances abound where their Protestantism is in doubt. Sir Murtagh's wife, for one, 'observed Lent and all Feast days' and complained to the parish priest when a servant girl broke fast during Lent. We might presume that the narrator of the tale of *Castle Rackrent*, 'Thady Quirk', also variously called 'Thady Mc Quirk', 'Thady M'Quirk, "'honest Thady'....'old Thady'...'poor Thady'" is a Catholic, at one stage he says that he had hopes of making a priest of his son Jason, but this same Jason receives formal schooling, becomes a lawyer, grants mortgages and eventually holds the deeds of the Rackrent/Stopgap estate, all highly unlikely performances by an Irish Catholic under the eighteenth century Penal Laws. Even the material dimensions of the building that is Castle Rackrent/Stopgap are in doubt: at times the house seems large and rambling, in other places in the text it is small and pokey, sometimes the road runs directly in front of the door, in other places there is a long avenue from the house to the road. In the words of W.J. McCormack there is 'a principle of inconsistency in the description of the castle itself.'³¹

Despite the disclaimer of the subtitle that it is 'An Hibernian Tale taken from the facts, and from the manners of the Irish squires, before the year 1782', the text is a

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

performance given in the present tense and the pages are left to the Hiberno-English or Anglo-Gaelic voice of Thady. The narration of the ‘illiterate Thady’, who can certainly read and possibly write, works as a brilliant deconstruction of the English language. His syntax re-works the grammar of English, the symbolic law of English, where the repudiated identification of (non)sense is recovered to be sensible with a laugh, cry, shout or question: the law of the English language is thus exposed as no longer being in control of the terms of its own discourse. The text is propelled forward by the Anglo-Gaelic voice, which anarchically disturbs the English language, as the ‘Hibernian Tale’ of *Castle Rackrent* disturbs the genre of social realism.

This distinctly reflexive form of narrative anarchy exhibits a pervasive cultural concern, which we often characterize as post-modernist: things are not only what they seem, what they seem is what they are. There is no unity of word or image or thing. Words and images wander free without things or exist as things themselves; as effects of narrative form and nothing else; unstable, unfixed and ungrounded in any reality, truth or identity other than those that Thady's voice provides. The editorial gesture of relocating the speech of the Hibernian to a past era by defining it as a discontinued mode of discursive value production is not a neutral act of identification. It might be seen to be a dominant performative gesture of incorporation meant to muzzle the disruptive voice of Hiberno-English/ Anglo-Gaelic, a voice, which in its dialect: its pronunciation, punctuation and idiom; disturbs the homogenous category of English. However, the multi-faceted editorial edifice of title page, preface, footnotes, closing advertisement and the long, fractured commentary of the glossary, accentuates the sublime achievement of the power of Thady's articulation to grip our imagination and dazzle our senses.

The eighteenth-century is marked by the concerted efforts of public men to systematize and regulate all knowledge by identifying what John Locke called ‘the

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

horizon...which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark part of things.’ Seeing and knowing were intrinsically linked, eighteenth century thought was concerned with perspective, the light of reason, the clarity of the mind's eye, distinguishing shadow from substance. In *Castle Rackrent* it is speech that creates reality and totally subsumes the power of sight to know reality. The reality of the text is utterly dominated by the mouth in all its most voracious guises and all the Rackrent lords are consumed by their uncontrolled lips. Thady, when a little boy, held a bumper of claret to Sir Patrick's mouth who could not hold it ‘on account of the great shake in his hand’, Sir Patrick sang a loud and hearty chorus and as the company gave three cheers he fell into a fit and promptly died. The next lord, Sir Murtagh, ‘overstrained his chest with making himself heard in one of his favourite causes’, he ruined the family finances by constantly arguing and too often losing in the courts, he died shouting at his wife. His brother, Sir Kit, inherited the estate. Sir Kit fought a number of duels but in his last duel Thady tells us that he was unlucky in merely ‘hitting the toothpick out of his adversary's finger and thumb, he received a ball in a vital part, and was brought home, ...speechless, on a hand-barrow.’ In a circular movement the final Rackrent, Sir Condy, who has metaphorically drunk his estate, gets Thady to feed him drink from the great bowl used by his ancestor Sir Patrick: ‘He swallows it down, and drops like one shot. - We lifts him up, and he was speechless’, and he dies shortly after.

Every moment of Thady's narration, conducted through the constant performance of pipe-smoking, is concerned with the mouth and its capacity to consume and create, to bring what is outside to the insides and to establish an outside according to interior desires. The glossary reminds us that in Ireland, ‘Canting does not mean talking or writing hypocritical nonsense but selling substantially at auction.’ According to Sigmund Freud the primal stage in the psychosexual development of can be understood as ‘Oral’ where the infant's pleasure centres on the mouth and the drive to

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

incorporate objects through the mouth, for nutrition and the pleasures of sucking. Those of us who have traumatic issues that arrest our development at this time may develop an oral fixation, that is an obsession with stimulating the mouth, which might manifest itself as over-eating, overly talkative, incessant smoking, alcoholism, in sarcastic or biting wit. Tempting as it might be to make a Freudian reading of the aesthetics of *Castle Rackrent* I would argue that it is Jacques Lacan's counter theory of human development that might prove more useful for understanding how *Castle Stopgap* has an enduring hold on readers' imagination. Lacan displaces Freud's accent on developmental stages to suggest that when we enter into language systems, which he terms the Symbolic, there is a deep 'split' that occurs in our self and this split will effect a gap between the language we articulate and our emotions. He followed Ferdinand de Saussure in understanding that language was a system of difference, a chain of signification in that each term or signifier had meaning only in how it related, yet was not, other signifiers. The realm of the Symbolic will always occur outside of the self, so the subject will never be in control of it and is perpetually seeking a way to fill or bridge or stop that gap between our 'self' and the Symbolic. The unconscious according to Lacan is not only the gaps or lacks in being and language, but is the home of the subject. Our consciousness tries to close out this unconsciousness, tries to erase the gaps. If we are never able to stop the gap, we can never return to a state of 'pure bliss' in which no split, no differentiation occurred. This gap is defined by Lacan as desire and our sense of identity is thus a desiring position. Identity is not one with itself because it starts with a prior lack in it: loss of mother as primary object of mental and physical fusion and, therefore, loss of certainty. The one who does not differentiate from the mother, never assumes an identity demarcated by having acquired its own name, 'self' fictions, particular history and unique body images. Thady's cloaked and wigged body, his insistence on his story as one of giving a loyal account of 'the family', before concern with any actual person (including himself), his identity being located in subservience to a title,

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

be it O'Shaughlin/Stopgap/Rackrent/ means that when we follow his tale, with its dizzying waltz of free floating signifiers, he provides us with the experience what it is to slip, to trip into the Symbolic from a state of bliss, to slide close to the surface of the gap. Terry Eagleton's description of Lacan might very well be applied in full to the effects and practices of Thady's narrative:

...for Lacan all discourse is, in a sense, a slip of the tongue: if the process of language is as slippery as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say, or say precisely what we mean. Meaning is always in some sense an approximation, a near-miss, a part failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue. We can certainly never articulate the truth in some 'pure' unmediated way...³²

A vivid demonstration of how it is the mouth rather than the eye that establishes the values of the text can be seen in Thady's interaction with Sir Kit and his new English wife. Thady's heart is in mouth as he walks after Sir Kit because he can see that Sir Kit is not pleased: "Is the large room damp, Thady?" said his honor - "Oh, damp, your honor! how should it but be as dry as a bone, (says I) after all the fires we have kept in it day and night - It's the barrack room your honor's talking on" Thady intuits that Sir Kit is referring to the (presumably damp) barrack room, and answers his question with an assurance that the large room is not only not damp but is also not the barrack room. Thady continues: "And what is a barrack room, pray, my dear" - were the first words I ever heard out of my lady's lips - 'No matter, my dear,' said he, and went on talking to me, ashamed like I should witness her ignorance." In a hilarious inversion of the usual colonial paradigm, Thady declares himself astounded at the ignorance of the English woman: '... it was "what's this, Sir Kit? and what's that, Sir Kit? (said she) that, that looks like a pile of black bricks, pray Sir Kit?" "My turf stack, my dear,' said my master, and bit his lip - Where have you lived, my lady, all your life, not to know a turf stack when you see it thought I, but I said nothing." The

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

logic whereby seeing is believing, is further undermined as the English lady ‘takes out her glass, and begins spying over the country’:

- “And what's all that black swamp out yonder, Sir Kit?” says she - “My bog, my dear” says he, and went on whistling - - “It's a very ugly prospect my dear,” says she - “You don't see it, my dear, (says he) for we've planted it out, when the trees grow up, in summer time,” says he - “Where are the trees, (said she) my dear,” still looking through her glass - “You are blind, my dear, (says he) what are these under your eyes?” - “These shrubs?” said she - “Trees,” said he - “Maybe they are what you call trees in Ireland,” my dear, (says she) but they are not a yard high, are they?”

The English wife sees shrubs, Sir Kit describes them as trees, the words ‘shrubs’ and ‘trees’ have significance because of the narrow gap between the signifiers ‘shrubs’ and ‘trees’, a gap that is stopped by Sir Kit’s iteration. Thady attempts to find a middle ground between Sir Kit’s trees and his wife’s shrubs: “They were planted out but last year, my lady” says I, to soften matters between them, ...- “they are very well grown for their age, and you'll not see the bog of Allyballycarricko'shaughlin at all at all through the skreen, when once the leaves come out -”. Thady’s attempt at bridging the gap fails:

...but she fell to laughing like one out of their right mind, and made me say the name of the bog over for her to get it by heart a dozen times - then she must ask me how to spell it, and what was the meaning of it in English - Sir Kit standing by whistling all the while - I verily believe she laid the corner stone of all her future misfortunes at that very instant - but I said no more, only looked at Sir Kit.

We may presume this silent look speaks volumes. Sir Kit’s English wife is also Jewish and is subsequently terrorized by Sir Kit who insists that pork be brought daily to the table, she retires to her room and is promptly locked in there by Sir Kit who will not let her out until she surrenders her diamond cross. All of the

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

Stopgap/Rackrent wives endure miserable marriages and gladly embrace their liberty on the deaths of their husbands but the fate of the Jewish wife, (who true to the ambivalent signifiers of *Castle Rackrent* wears a cross), is particularly grim as she remains in captivity for seven years.³³

Accepting that *Castle Rackrent* is not a text of literary realism does not mean that the historical contexts in which it was created is not ultimately revealing of its meaning. Ó Gallchoir brilliantly reads Edgeworth's representation of Ireland in *Castle Rackrent* as demonstrating that the 'discourse of the male public sphere' is inadequate to the task and that it is the 'highly personal and local voice' that alone can represent Ireland.³⁴ The final section of this article examines the personal, local and psychic impulses behind the creation of Thady's voice.

Castle Rackrent began as a performance by Maria for her Aunt Maria Ruxton and cousin Sophy and continued to be created over the course of at least six years through performances for her and cousins and extended family. John Langan, the Edgeworth family steward was the model for Thady and the family annals the *Black Book of Edgeworthstown* supplied the material for the characters and adventures of the O'Shaughlin/Stopgap/Rackrents.³⁵ Throughout the years of its ongoing (re)creation there was much in the political landscape to cause the Edgeworths confusion and terror. Their home in the Irish midlands saw a precipitous rise in religious tensions surrounding the foundation of the Orange Order in 1795 and a declamation of real and imagined atrocities committed on all sides during the unsuccessful rebellion by the Republican United Irishmen in 1798. Government efforts in those years to exploit sectarian feeling to prevent alliance between religious groups, powerfully fed the forces of sectarian division. The division split the landed class itself. Indeed, the contesting elections by rival landed candidates of the 'Ascendancy' and of liberal outlook respectively helped to polarize division at local level and to perpetuate it.

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

Sectarian feeling took its sharpest form during elections as rival landlord groups of liberal and 'Ascendancy' outlook strove with one another.³⁶

Maria's beloved father, Richard Lovell, was very much a liberal reformer, believing that Catholics ought to be full citizens of the country even with rights to suffrage regardless of property. He was also an inventor of a myriad of devices, such as a system that released coins to passing beggars for their time spent working a hand pump that drew from a well into a cistern within the house. In the uneasy years while *Castle Rackrent/Stopgap* was being created and performed among the Edgeworth family, he was involved in cantankerous election campaigns, which saw him elected as an MP to the Irish parliament representing the borough of St Johns Town. In 1794, as fears and tensions continued to heighten, he wrote a treatise on a prototype telegraph system, *Essay on the Art of Conveying Swift and Secret Intelligence*, (published in the Sixth Volume of *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, of which he was a founder member) his offer to establish such a nationwide system was not taken up by the Government. In 1797 Richard's third wife, Elizabeth Sneyd, died and he shortly after married Frances Anne Beaufort a year younger than Maria. In the momentous year of 1798, Richard Lovell, mustered a troop of yeomanry to defend Edgeworthstown from attack by the French-led Republicans who were sweeping in from Co. Mayo and the family went for protection to the garrison town of Longford. It was in Longford that Maria's father had a lucky escape in fleeing from a Loyalist mob that was angry at his suspect pro-Catholic sympathies. In September 1798 the Republicans were routed in nearby Ballinamuck, and the Edgeworths returned home to find that their house had been saved from being destroyed by the rebels on the intervention of a local woman who successfully spoke on the family's behalf. This was not the first time that the house had been saved by a sub altern, the family annals the *Black Book of Edgeworthstown* which is the source book for so many of the incidents of the tale, recounts how a Catholic servant saved the house

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

from attack a century before, in the troubled period during the 1690s. However, as W.J. McCormack puts it: in the 'prolonged period, perhaps six or more years, during which [*Castle Rackrent*] was composed, we see also the shifting significance of that saving Catholicism in the family's history.³⁷ A distant relative of the Edgeworths, the Abbé Edgeworth came to fame as the prominent clerical comfort to the Bourbons at the time of their execution and it was Catholic intellectuals who provided much of the counter-revolutionary debate on the European continent. Indeed it was the Irish-speaking Catholic North Cork militia who were instrumental in crushing the Republican rebellion in Co. Wexford. A symptom of how swampy and shifting was the political ground of the late 1790s in Ireland can be seen in the fact that although Richard Lovell spoke strongly in favour of the Act of Union, seeing it as Ireland's best chance for the economic advancement and social cohesion, he ultimately voted against the Bill to protest his disgust at the corrupt means the Crown used to pass it into law. The family drama that is *Castle Rackrent/Stopgap* provided an opportunity for the Edgeworths, during these years of familial and public death, new alliances, uncertainty, confusion and terror, to act out and release their anxiety and in their shared laughter affirm their own bonds of love and affection. *Castle Rackrent* allowed the family to stage a theatrical stopgap in the midst of fluctuation, uncertainty and dramatic change, where all signifiers of allies and enemies were open to change. The Edgeworths rejoiced in the linguistic devices of their servant, John Langan, whose Anglo-Gaelic world of service, loyalty and community was a high culture verbal performance. In this world genealogy was highly prized and local memory was a collective enterprise of story telling and the public performance of poetry and song, often performed at ritualised events such as funerals and pattern days. This resulted in a rich oral culture that keenly maintained its records but rather than prizing an ideal of objectivity, so valued in print culture, the record was retold in performances designed to provide a gloss or balm that suited the emotional, social and political needs of the audience present.³⁸ In the voice of Thady we hear the voice of a consummate verbal

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

performer: establishing distinct and discreet narrative codes where events are recorded while unflattering implications are evaded or humorously euphemised, and there is a studied unawareness, or rather a refusal to cast judgement or make distinctions in favour of maintaining flexible bonds of affection or leaving as many options open in time of revolution.

Castle Rackrent ends with the abrupt, curious question: ‘Did the Warwickshire militia, who were chiefly artisans, teach the Irish to drink beer, or did they learn from the Irish to drink whiskey?’ this strange open-ending is perhaps an apt close to such an unusual verbal text. It is at once a reference to but also an occlusion of the brutal years of the Irish 1790s where some 80,000 militia were brought from England to maintain the rule of the Crown. It suggests an ecumenism through mutual commerce and more specifically the rituals of public drinking, the quaffing, swallowing of liquids designed for the shared performance of celebration, commemoration and forgetting: the very practice and achievement of *Castle Rackrent*.

¹ Richard Lovell Edgeworth to David Augustus Beaufort, 26 April 1800, quoted by Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) p. 359.

² Brian Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth’s Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997) pp. 71-107 discusses Thady’s ‘idiolet’ and ‘fluent oral vernacular’ but sees it as being deployed by Edgeworth in order to consolidate the political position of the ruling Protestant Ascendancy.

³ Most literary historians use the term ‘Anglo Irish’ to refer to literature written by Irish people in the English language, while ‘Anglo Irish’ is more popularly used to refer to that colonial Protestant ruling class, such as the Edgeworths who were descended from English settlers and landowners.

⁴ Butler, p. 364.

⁵ Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists 1800-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) p. 23.

⁶ Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998) p. 33.

⁷ M.C.C. Seton, *Every Irishman's Library* (London: Longman, 1915) p. xviii.

⁸ James Newcomer, *Maria Edgeworth the Novelist* (Fort Worth TX: Texas Christian University, 1967) p. 151. P.F. Sheeran supports this reading in ‘Colonists and Colonized: Some Aspects of Anglo-Irish Literature from Swift to Joyce’ *Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983) pp102-4.

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

⁹ Robert Lee Woolf, (ed.) Castle Rackrent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. x. Hereafter referred to as Castle Rackrent.

¹⁰ Tom Dunne, Maria Edgeworth and the Colonial Mind: Twenty-Sixth O'Donnell Lecture (Dublin: National University of Ireland, 1984) p. 8.

¹¹ Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature: A Study (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931) p. 7.

¹² Castle Rackrent p. xii.

¹³ Seamus Deane, "Fiction and Politics: The Nineteenth-Century National Character" Gaeliana 6 (1984) p. 90.

¹⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic. (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1984) p. 149. Feminist criticism tends to read Thady's narrative as the brilliant creation of Maria who uniquely, though temporarily, escaped the control of her father and the editorial appendices as the result of Richard Lovell Edgeworth's later imposition. For a more nuanced feminist reading of Edgeworth see Caroline Gonda, Reading Daughter's Fictions, 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Clíona Ó Gallchoir, Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Butler, p. 360.

¹⁶ See for example the essays in the collection, Family Chronicles: Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent edited by Cólín Owens, (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, Totowa NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987) and the collection An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts edited by Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004). Ann Owens Weekes reads Castle Rackrent as a feminist narrative on the domestic plot: Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1990) pp. 41-57.

¹⁷ Declan Kiberd, Irish Classics (London: Granta, 2000) p. 258.

¹⁸ For readings of Castle Rackrent as a novel of strong 'Anglo-Irish' political intent see Sharon Murphy Maria Edgeworth and Romance (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004) pp. 144-152; who reads Castle Rackrent and all of Edgeworth's Irish tales as being concerned with the need to reform the Protestant Ascendancy; and in her evocative reading of Edgeworth's 'gothic realism' in Castle Rackrent Margot Gayle Backus reads Edgeworth as temporarily destabilizing Irish and Anglo-Irish identities in order to ultimately secure the political dominance of the Protestant Ascendancy: see The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999) pp. 96-106.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson describes this as 'socially symbolic acts' see The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1982 reprint) pp.17-102 and also Mikhail M. Bakhtin The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays ed. M. Holquist, Slavic Series (University of Texas Press, 1982 reprint) p. 234.

²⁰ Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel (The University of Nebraska Press, 1983 reprint) pp. 19-63.

²¹ 'Beyond the Pale' is a phrase that comes from Irish history – the pale was the colonized area on the east coast of Ireland surrounding Dublin dating from the fifteenth century that was inside the English palisades and firmly under English jurisdiction.

Castle Stoppag: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

- ²² David Lloyd, Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment (Duke University Press, 1993) p. 152.
- ²³ Castle Rackrent p.
- ²⁴ Claire Connolly's "Reading Responsibility in Castle Rackrent" Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity (Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland ed. London: Macmillan, 1997, pp. 136-161). See in particular p. 150 and p. 158.
- ²⁵ Ó Gallchoir, pp. 60-70.
- ²⁶ Joep Leersen, Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day), 1996.
- ²⁷ Castle Rackrent pp. 8, 25, 28, 24, 20 and 31 respectively.
- ²⁸ Castle Rackrent pp. 4-5.
- ²⁹ Castle Rackrent was sent to the publishers at the end of 1799, published in January 1800, and the Act of Union was passed, amid much controversy, in August 1800.
- ³⁰ Castle Rackrent pp. 5-6.
- ³¹ W.J. McCormack, "Setting and Ideology: with Reference to the Fiction of Maria Edgeworth" p. 47.
- ³² Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwells, 1983) p. 169.
- ³³ For a discussion of anti-Semitism in Edgeworth's novels see Susan Manly 'Harrington and Anti-Semitism: Mendelssohn's Invisible Agency' in An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts edited by Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004) pp.235-249.
- ³⁴ Ó Gallchoir, p. 64.
- ³⁵ See Butler, pp. 240-243 and pp. 352-360 for a discussion of the sources and composition of Castle Rackrent.
- ³⁶ L.M. Cullen, Hidden Ireland: Re-assessment of a Concept (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988) p. 13.
- ³⁷ W.J. McCormack, Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History from 1789 to 1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 105.
- ³⁸ Critics often read *Castle Rackrent* in conjunction with *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802) which Maria and her father wrote to counter the English tendency to mistake the Irish or rather Hiberno-English play with figurative language and varieties of humour as evidence of stupidity. Perhaps the Edgeworths' much-neglected two volume work from 1798 *Practical Education*, might ultimately prove a more useful foil for *Castle Rackrent* as it is a ground-breaking work which recounts in detail the innovative method of respectful record keeping of children's entry into language. Richard Lovell's second wife, Honora Sneyd first started the Edgeworth project of carefully recording actual conversations between herself and the children (RL eventually fathered 22 children with his four wives) in order to maintain records of children's thought processes that could be analysed by parents and educators as a means to understanding how children develop their own chain of reasoning. This early work on educational psychology was to prove to be immensely influential throughout the nineteenth century. Measures that interrupted or modified the child's own narratives of meaning and location were strongly denounced, the authors demanded that parents and educators allow the individual child to find and develop their own place in language and the practice of learning. See Mitzi Myers, "Anecdotes from the Nursey" in Maria Edgeworth's Practical Education (1798):

Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture

Learning from Children “Abroad and At Home” Princeton University Library Chronicle LX:2, Winter 1999, pp. 220-250.