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Resistance in The Wild Irish Girl

Marie-Noëlle Zeender

University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis. E-mail :
zeender@unice.fr.

In the conclusion of the preface to *Castle Rackrent*, which was probably written at the end of the year 1799, Maria Edgeworth makes the following remarks:

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. [...] 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.¹

The statement is both right and wrong because on the one hand if the Union between Ireland and England was inevitable, on the other hand the issue of the loss of identity was no trifling matter at all. In fact, Edgeworth gave expression here to the attitude of condescending sympathy for the Irish so typical of the Ascendancy. Obviously, Sydney Owenson, later Lady Morgan, had a very different purpose when she published *The Wild Irish Girl, A National Tale* in 1806. It is true that unlike Maria Edgeworth, she was of modest origin, and a Catholic. The epigraph that introduces her novel sets the tone of the whole story, and shows that her main preoccupation was to do justice to her own people.² In the context of the Union, the title and the subtitle of the novel were provocative, and the ironical undertones could not be overlooked by the reading public. Moreover, it was still somewhat risky to write about Ireland at the time, especially on behalf of Catholic emancipation, and in this matter Sydney Owenson's book was a challenge to the authorities. The fact that the book ran through nine editions in England and America in only two years shows that it was a tremendous success.

From a technical point of view, *The Wild Irish Girl* is neither a literary masterpiece, nor a particularly original book. Indeed, the author adopted the epistolary novel form, which was already somewhat outdated then. In this respect, unlike her female colleague Maria Edgeworth, who had given birth to the so-called regional novel in the English language, she did not bring any striking innovations. In the same way, the plot is on the whole conventional in that the book relates the thwarted love of two young people with different social and cultural backgrounds. Yet, the genre is not easy to define because the novel is multifaceted: it is certainly a love romance containing even some gothic

¹Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, Edited with an Introduction by George Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 5.

²Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl, a National Tale*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), "This race of men, tho' savage they may seem, / The country, too, with many a mountain rough, / Yet are they sweet to him who tries and tastes them." Fazio Delli Uberti's *Travels through Ireland in the Fourteenth Century*. Translated from the Italian.

elements, it is also a travel-book, but being “a national tale,” it is a historical record as well, with various social and political implications.

The starting point of the story, situated some time in the eighteenth century, is quite in the line of the *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, as the introductory letters inform the reader, the Earl of M—, who is exasperated by his son’s misbehaviour, decides to banish him to his estate in Ireland for the summer. He strongly believes in the old saying: “Adamantus est ad disciplinum in Hibernia,”³ and considers that such a disciplinary measure is his son’s last chance to redeem himself. Thus, the young Horatio M— who has led a dissipated life in London, is sent to the north-west coast of Connaught in order to devote himself entirely to his law studies. Needless to say that the young man accepts his father’s decision with a heavy heart, and contemplates this exile with a real abhorrence. So, Horatio’s despair and utter contempt for the land and the people of the island first of all suggest the notion of resistance in the book. When he arrives at Dublin, he sends a letter to a friend and gives the following assessment of the situation:

I feel the strongest objection to becoming a resident in the remote part of a country which is still shaken by the convulsions of an anarchical spirit; where for a series of ages the olive of peace has not been suffered to shoot forth *one* sweet blossom of national concord, [...] and the natural character of whose factious sons [...] is turbulent, faithless, intemperate, and cruel; formerly destitute of arts, letters, or civilization [...].⁴

Such a negative statement clearly reflects the English attitude to Ireland, as well as the racial prejudices against the Irish at the time. Horatio is absolutely convinced that what awaits him in Connaught is only boredom, bigotry, and chaos. In fact he does not have the slightest knowledge about the people he will meet there. Yet, once he gets to M—House, his attention is drawn to quite different matters when he talks with the old steward. Indeed, he gets a very different impression about the natives when the man relates the heroic behaviour of one of the great local heroes:

[...] a great Prince of Inismore, in the wars of Queen Elizabeth, here had a castle and a great tract of land on the *borders*, of which he was deprived [...] because he would neither cut his *glibbs*, shave his upper lip, nor shorten his shirt: and so he was driven with the rest of us beyond the *pale*.⁵

Later, Horatio is quite astonished to discover that there is still a Prince of Inismore living with his daughter in this remote part of the world. As he travels through the country, he gradually gets acquainted with all the strata of Irish society from the lower classes to the dignified Irish chieftain O’Melville, and he cannot but realise that, far from being the hostile savages that he imagined, they are very hospitable people. However, he has to remain on his guard because he soon discovers that he is no other than the descendant of the English general who

³Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl, a National Tale*, p. 7 : “He was sent away for instruction to Ireland.”

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl, a National Tale*, pp. 37–38.

once murdered a Prince of Inismore during the civil wars of Cromwell. As a reward for what was then judged as an act of heroism, he had received the lands and castle of his enemy. Consequently, it is vital for Horatio, the representative of the traditional enemy and usurper, to conceal his real identity, and to bear the burden of his ancestor's transgression covertly, as his own father had done before him.

In fact, it appears that the young man's tribulations in Connaught amount to a quest for personal as well as social and political redemption. Even though he is at first presented as a libertine, Horatio claims to have kept intact a romantic freshness. Indeed, while on his way to Inismore, he defines himself as "a novel-read school boy,"⁶ and considers himself as "a *Chevalier Errant*"⁷ lost in some terra incognita. Although he is in a melancholy mood, he finds a real consolation in the contemplation of the sublime beauty of the scenery that surrounds him everywhere. When he gets near the castle of Inismore at sunset, he is really fascinated by the sight of the imposing ruins, "grand even in desolation, and magnificent in decay."⁸ In other words, the wild setting immediately overcomes his resistance, and he is immediately captured by the scenery. Like a gothic hero, he feels such a powerful attraction to the ruins that he does not hesitate to take the greatest risks to reach them. Thus, he crosses "a curious danger-threatening bridge... leaving a yawning chasm of some fathoms deep beneath the foot of the wary passenger,"⁹ in order to have a better sight of the castle. Once he has reached the enchanted land,¹⁰ Horatio is actually under a spell, and yields to a powerful aesthetic emotion. From that point on, he is incapable of turning his attention from the picturesque scenes that he discovers. The vision of the procession going to High Mass in memory of the murdered Prince of Inismore, has for him an undeniable exotic character. The Prince, his daughter the Irish vestal, the chaplain, the bard, are an amazing sight to his eyes, and he feels the urge to follow them all the way to the dilapidated castle. Just when he is about to leave, he suddenly hears a charming strain of music and a no less charming woman's voice. What he experiences then is not love at first sight, but rather love at first hearing in this instance. In order to see where the music comes from, he climbs the ruins of a parapet and watches the scene through an open casement, but after a while the stones give way under his feet and he falls down into the Prince's apartments.

The romantic circumstances of Horatio's encounter with the Irish chieftain O'Melville and his daughter Glorvina — her name means sweet voice in Irish — are worthy of a novel by Ann Radcliffe, or Mrs Roche. It is clear that Sydney Owenson insists first of all on the subversive beauty of her country, so that what Horatio experiences first of all is a sort of sudden aesthetic conversion. In his period of convalescence at Inismore, he passes himself off as a poor travelling

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl, a National Tale*, p. 45.

¹⁰See *ibid.*, p. 51 : "I felt like being of some other sphere newly alighted on a distant orb."

artist named Henry Mortimer, and is invited by the Prince to teach drawing to Glorvina. Although he realises remorsefully that he is “the hereditary object of hereditary detestation, beneath the roof of [his] implacable enemy,”¹¹ the young man decides to stay, and although reluctantly, he plays a double game. It is then that the second phase of his conversion takes place. Through his conversations with the Prince, Glorvina, or Father John the priest, Horatio learns about the realities of Ireland, but he also gets acquainted with the local language and manners. The situation gives the author a good opportunity to introduce her own cultural, social and political comments through the characters themselves, or long footnotes meant to underline the authenticity of her remarks. Sometimes, Sydney Owenson does not hesitate to resort to audacious comparisons, as for instance when she establishes a parallel between the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs and the British invasion of Ireland. Indeed, in Letter XXV, she gives the following comment :

Had the *Historiographer* of MONTEZUMA OF ATALIBA defended the *resistance* of his countrymen, or recorded the woes from whence it sprung, though his QUIPAS was bathed in their blood, or embued with their tears, he would have unavailingly recorded them; for the victorious *Spaniard* was insensible to the woes he had created, and called the resistance it gave birth to CRUELTY.¹²

There is some scathing irony in the analogy between Spain and Britain, the worst traditional enemies, nevertheless there is undeniably some terrible truth in the statement. In fact, throughout the novel, Horatio, who narrates his own adventures, serves as a foil to the actors of the story, who are in their turn the spokesmen of the author. As the young man converses with the characters, or travels through the country, he gives expression to his opinions on the state of Ireland. What he notices everywhere is a clear resistance to social as well as political integration, and not only among the O’Melvilles and their attendants, but also among the country people, who all conform to their ancient lifestyle as if nothing had changed. Thus, the Prince and Glorvina dress in the prohibited Irish mode, speak the Irish language, keep a museum of national antiquities, celebrate the local festivals with the peasants, and practise the Catholic religion. Objectively, such a behaviour may be considered as rather harmless, but it is more seditious than it seems at first sight because it reflects the absolute contempt of the Irish for the colonial order imposed upon them. By not conforming to the rules, they choose to live in a kind of proud exile in their own motherland. The figure of the Prince is a good example of such a form of resistance. The old chieftain is the very embodiment of genuine Milesian nobility, and he even reaches a mythical dimension as the portrait made by Horatio suggests :

[...] a form almost gigantic in stature, yet gently thrown forward by evident infirmity; limbs of Herculean mould, and a countenance rather furrowed by the inroads of vehement passions, than the deep

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 176.

trace of years. Eyes still emanating the ferocity of an unsubdued spirit, yet tempered by a strong trait of benevolence[...].¹³

The description highlights the character's tormented nature, and further O'Melville is even compared to Milton's ruined angel while his daughter is likened to an angel of Mercy. For her part, Glorvina, is simply the epitome of perfection, that is to say beauty, intelligence and virtue combined. It is obvious from the start that she has a superior status, not only because she is a princess, but also because she is a very accomplished young lady, who knows Greek and Latin, medicine and music as well. In this respect, the character is typical of the ideal of Enlightenment feminism. To Horatio she personifies the unattainable woman, and in her presence, he is no longer the libertine that he was in London. He is indeed constantly put to the test, as his reverential attitude shows:

I approach her trembling; and she repels the most distant advances with such dignified softness, such chaste modest reserve, that the restraint I sometimes labour under in her presence, is almost concomitant to the bliss it bestows.¹⁴

In fact, what the young man learns in Connaught is not only Irish culture and manners but also the most precious human values, not only tolerance but also the nobility of the heart among other things. In other words, during his stay in Ireland, the "wild English boy" becomes civilised. However, Horatio is in a dilemma because even though he loves the young woman passionately, he cannot make her his wife for political reasons, and still less his mistress for moral reasons. Thus, the Irish depicted in the novel are models of virtue and integrity. Although they are under the yoke of the penal laws, even the common people remain faithful to their past and their traditions. The moving scene of the funeral celebrated secretly by Father John at the burial ground is a good illustration of their resistance to the official church. As the priest reveals to Horatio:

This ceremony [...] is performed by us instead of the funeral service, which is denied to the Roman Catholics. For we are not permitted, like the protestant ministers, to perform the last solemn office for our departed fellow creatures.¹⁵

The world that the young exile discovers is at once mystical and out of time, frozen in the glorious past of the Milesian order where the old Brehon law prevails, a world apart where the material realities have little place. Being a Milesian nobleman, O'Melville has no notion whatever of what the management of a property involves, and this is the reason why he is so poor and so easily swindled. His aristocratic origins bar him from making profit, and when he is dogged by creditors, he suffers the humiliation of being imprisoned for debts like a common criminal. Glorvina is conscious that such an attitude to money can be harmful to her community, and she sums up the whole tragedy of her class when she shows Horatio "a poor Connaught gentleman, who would rather starve than work [...]."¹⁶

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁴Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl, a National Tale*, p. 190.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 117.

All the considerations about the art of the bards and the repressive measures against them¹⁷ are extremely tedious especially to the modern reader, yet they reveal that the Irish were more easily ruled if they were deprived of their cultural identity and traditional points of reference. Sydney Owenson goes as far as justifying such a policy by asserting that in the sixteenth century “Elizabeth [was] jealous of that influence which the bardic order of Ireland held over the most puissant of her chiefs.”¹⁸ However, as Father John points out, such drastic measures could not be efficient because according to him : “an Irishman may be argued out of an error, [...] he will never be forced. His understanding may be convinced, but his spirit will never be subdued.”¹⁹ The words imply that according to him Irish resistance will last as long as the colonial order is imposed upon the population. Yet, as the priest underlines repeatedly, this does not mean that his people are ungovernable, and he considers that their loyalty to the Stuarts is a good example of their loyalty.²⁰

Kathryn Kirkpatrick is right when she asserts that “*The Wild Irish Girl* is a novel about origins [that] seeks to provide a genealogy for a separate Irish identity at a historical moment when that identity seemed lost.”²¹ Despite some romantic excesses, the message conveyed by the story is to redeem not only the glorious past of Ireland, but also the modern Irish themselves. Thus, Sydney Owenson’s contribution to the Irish cause was essential because she managed to give back their pride to the Irish, and to put an end to their feelings of shame and humiliation. What is particularly striking is that, like most female writers of her time, she never calls for insurrection and never advocates violence. On the contrary, the Irish characters are presented as innocent victims oppressed by a barbarous system. It is obvious that Sydney Owenson aimed at moving the average English reader to tears by denouncing the injustice of their treatment. The trick works on Horatio, just as it had worked before on his father as we learn in the end. However, what the author also demonstrates is that the language, manners, music and arts are all subversive weapons against the colonial forces. Moreover, what the novel illustrates extensively is not just the refinement of the native Irish, what Horatio defines as “primeval simplicity and primeval virtue,”²² but also their superiority. To give more weight to such considerations the author presents them on an equal footing with the modern Greeks. Indeed, Father John keeps on asserting such things as : “the Irish are all dancers, like the Greeks,”²³ or he asserts : “I know of no country which the Irish at present resemble but the modern Greeks.”²⁴ In this respect, the message conveyed by Sydney Owenson is very different from what Maria Edgeworth describes in *Castle Rackrent* for

¹⁷See Letter XXVII, pp. 197–206.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁰*Idem*, “[...] the moment a Prince of the Royal line of Milesius placed the British diadem on his brow, the sword of resistance was sheathed [...]”

²¹*Ibid.*, p. VII.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 123.

²³Letter XXVII, p. 146.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 183.

instance. Indeed, what Thady Quirk's narrative highlights after all is the absolute incompetence of his degenerate Irish masters to manage the family estate. For her part, the author of *The Wild Irish Girl* has an answer for everything to account for the state of Ireland. For example, when Horatio shows some perplexity at finding no trace of the distant past of Celtic architecture, Father John points out:

The ancient Irish, like the modern, had more *soul*, more genius, than worldly prudence, or cautious calculating forethought. The feats of the hero engrossed them more than the exertions of the mechanist; works of imagination seduced them from pursuing works of utility.²⁵

The statement puts special emphasis on the idea that the Irish are a breed apart living in the realm of imagination, but it is also a thinly veiled allusion to British realism and pragmatism. By giving the Irish such a heroic and artistic status, the priest once more underlines their spiritual superiority over the English. Many years later, Oscar Wilde among others developed a similar theory at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Wild Irish Girl is a subversive novel in so far as it advocates reconciliation through marriage, that is to say assimilation, a notion that sounds particularly modern. In this narrative, the English characters are far from glorious because in fact they use a gross stratagem to get themselves accepted by their Irish hosts. The Earl of M— claims to be a mysterious stranger defending the Irish cause, and Horatio plays the part of a poor travelling artist. However they also feel terribly guilty even though they try to justify their acts in the conclusion of the novel. Moreover, the father and the son are, although unwittingly, rivals in love, and they both want to marry Glorvina. The Earl is in fact the anonymous benefactor of the O'Melvilles, and he pays for the release of the Prince from jail after his imprisonment for debts. The solution that he proposes is to marry Glorvina in order to "retribut[e] the parent through the medium of the child."²⁶ In other words, he thinks that his title and money can assuage centuries of abuse. The marriage scene described in the last pages of the novel contains the most melodramatic ingredients that we can imagine. Horatio suddenly turns up and interrupts the ceremony just in the nick of time. He realises then that the bridegroom is his own father, while the latter is filled with horror when he recognises his son. The commotion caused by this providential intervention has tragic consequences; the Prince has a stroke and soon dies in his daughter's arms, his eyes raised to the crucifix. At last, the Earl of M— and Horatio have their final explanation, they get reconciled, and the reformed young man marries Glorvina.

The lesson from the story is drawn by Horatio himself : "Let the names of Inismore and M— be inseparably blended, and the distinctions of English and Irish, of protestant and catholic, for ever buried."²⁷ Needless to say that then Sydney Owenson indulges in wishful thinking. The very romantic dénouement of her novel puts an end to the feud between the two traditional enemies, but also

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 191–192.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁷Letter XXVII, p. 250.

to the profound misunderstanding between the father and the son. Yet, the general impression left on the reader is mixed because all things considered, the Irish chieftain and his daughter lose everything in the bargain. Indeed, the union between Horatio and Glorvina definitely puts an end to the ancient line of Inismore.

As we have seen before, the reception of *The Wild Irish Girl* was highly favourable, yet, the novel also aroused a feeling of hatred among a certain number of critics. Some Tories saw in the author a dangerous nationalist, and her mortal enemy was certainly John Wilson Croker, who condemned all her works unreservedly. In December 1806, he wrote a very rash judgement in the *Freeman's Journal* :

I accuse Miss Owenson of having written bad novels, and worse poetry [...]. I accuse her of attempting to vitiate mankind — of attempting to undermine morality by sophistry and that, under the insidious mask of virtue, sensibility and truth.²⁸

However, the very notion of true Irishness that she develops in her novel also caused a real uproar. Indeed, Father John, Horatio's *cicerone* and the author's spokesman in the instance, establishes a clear distinction between the trueborn Milesians and the inhabitants of the North of the island. As he and Horatio ride to Ulster, the priest warns him that "this part of Ireland may in some respects be considered as a Scottish colony; and in fact, Scotch dialect, Scotch manners, Scotch modes, and the Scotch character almost universally prevail."²⁹ Such considerations could not leave the dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterians indifferent, and many years after the publication of the novel, James McHenry, *alias* Solomon Secondsight, could not forgive the author for her conception of Irishness. In the preface of one of his national tales, he expressed his indignation about the unfair comparison established between the southern and northern inhabitants of the island in these words:

[...] an Irishwoman at least ought not to have been so wilfully and unjustly abusive of any portion of her countrymen, even if they did not happen to be descended from Milesian ancestors, and were unable to speak the original language of the country.³⁰

The least that can be said is that even though *The Wild Irish Girl* was a bestseller, it did not have unanimous support from all the Irish. In fact, most ironically, Owenson's national ideal rekindled the clash between the Catholics and the Protestants. It is clear that her own prejudices about racial purity are suspect, and the innumerable clichés that she develops in her story endured for a long time, and still exasperate the modern Irish.

Consequently, if Sydney Owenson deserves credit for tackling the issue of Irish identity, she did not manage to reconcile her fellow citizens. From a literary

²⁸Quoted in Patrick Rafroidi, *L'Irlande et le Romantisme* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille "Encyclopédie universitaire", 1972), p. 43.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

³⁰*The Insurgent Chief; or O'Halloran. an Irish Historical Tale of 1798*, In three volumes, by Solomon Secondsight, author of *The Wilderness*, *The Spectre of the Forest*, etc. (Philadelphia: printed for H. C. Carey and I. Lea / London: re-printed for A. K. Newman) 1824), pp. XVIII–XIX.

point of view, the impact of *The Wild Irish Girl* on her contemporaries was tremendous, and the book was also a real source of inspiration for other Irish writers. Indeed, the figures of the Prince of Inismore and of Glorvina became actual types. Thus, Charles Robert Maturin published a novel entitled *The Wild Irish Boy* in 1808, and he partly drew his inspiration from Sydney Owenson to write *The Milesian Chief*, a gothic romance, in 1812. However, the vision developed in this novel is a very pessimistic approach to the question, because Connal O'Morven, the Milesian hero, falls in love with the daughter of an English lord, but he leads a rebellion against the British troops which ends in horrible bloodshed. Much later, at the end of the century Bram Stoker's very first novel, *The Snake's Pass* published in 1890, was simply a modernised version of Sydney Owenson's story. Here too the young English hero, Arthur, who travels to the West, falls in love with the Irish scenery before falling in love with a beautiful Milesian girl named Norah. As David Glover points out, the romantic dénouement of Stoker's romance owes much to his famous predecessor:

[...] the novel's finale ties the two countries together in a new kind of Act of Union, rewritten on Gladstonian lines, ratified on English soil to popular acclaim, and looking forward to a line of Anglo-Irish heirs in perpetuity.³¹

In other words, Sydney Owenson's solution to the Irish problem can be considered as modern, because on the one hand she champions the cause of Irish identity, and on the other hand she advocates the reconciliation between the English and the native Irish through marriage. A few years later Maria Edgeworth followed the example of her female colleague in *The Absentee*. Indeed, the character of Lord Colambre is the offspring of an Anglo-Irish union, and she defines him in these words : "The sobriety of English good sense mixed most advantageously with Irish vivacity: English prudence governed, but did not extinguish, his Irish enthusiasm."³²

If we look at the situation objectively, it appears that the main stumbling block is that Sydney Owenson's sexual politics— even love matches are no miracle cures!— did not result in peace and harmony. On the contrary, the convulsions of history have proved that she was no prophet in her own land. Consequently, her very romantic ideal has no political validity, yet the cultural resistance that she describes and defends is still relevant today. The debate has perhaps never been so fierce throughout the whole world with the resurgence of national identities. Resistance in Ireland, Scotland or Brittany, or Corsica and the Basque Country, just to mention a few examples, often takes an alarming turn and sometimes leads to the worst excesses. As George Lukacs put it a long time ago:

The appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national

³¹David Glover, *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals, Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 49.

³²Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, with an introduction by Heidi Thomson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 7.

dishonour, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology.³³

The remark has never been so true. Nevertheless, if *The Wild Irish Girl* did not send men to death, unlike some other Irish writings such as W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* for instance, it certainly awakened national consciousness in Ireland.

³³Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1974), p. 25.