

French connections in Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond*

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In her novel, *Ormond*,¹ Maria Edgeworth's character Dora travels to Paris to enlist French support for the Irish cause. She is not the first to embark on such a mission. Unlike her predecessors Dora is seeking aid for Irish minds – those repressed, diverse voices that have been forced towards the isolation of the binarism of Catholic versus Protestant. This foreign aid may release the Irish mind from the predicament in which it finds itself. In *Ormond* Edgeworth attempted to write, a 'National Tale' which, according to Katie Trumpener, addresses questions of cultural distinctiveness, national policy and political separation.² However, the contradictions of Irish life, in its sharp religious divide, forbade the successful undertaking of a venture which, by definition, is a homogenous and unitary narrative. Edgeworth is not prepared to silence the strident or the contentious or to plaster over the chasm of religious division with bland ecumenism. This is one of the strengths of *Ormond*. If it is seen to challenge the credibility of the National Tale it may be because the National Tale is unable to handle the particularity of the Irish predicament. Edgeworth refuses to alter the practice to suit the theory. The real significance of *Ormond* may be read through its French connection – mainly that passage of the novel where its protagonists renew their vision through the language and culture of *légèreté*, when they are domiciled in Paris. Often dismissed as a frivolous interlude, an opportunity for the author to flesh out the alleged thinness of the Irish novel, the passage can also be read – through a post-structuralist approach – as the marginalized cornerstone that is capable of destabilizing the myth, assumptions and language of the entire project of the narrative.

This is not to ignore *Ormond's* efforts to imagine resolution at a local level. Whatever her extratextual writings may indicate, especially in relation to Spenser, in *Ormond* Edgeworth has no problem in seeing Protestantism as being comfortable with Irishness. The Protestant parliamentarian, Sir Ulick O'Shane, is a 'fine gallant off-hand looking Irishman'.³ His speech is interspersed with terms like 'patriotic' and 'love of country'. Even the bigoted Presbyterian, Mrs M'Crule, identifies closely enough with Ireland to lament its inevitable ruination, should a particular ecumenical enterprise succeed at the local school. One can sense the author insisting on these voices' legitimacy and on their right to be heard as a distinctive identity, but from within, and relating to, the community/nation.

1 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond* (Belfast: Appletree, 1992). 2 Katie Trumpener, *National character nationalist plots: national tale and historical novel in the age of Waverley, 1806–1830* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), p. 133. 3 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 4.

Ormond's openness to heteroglossic theory can be read in chapter 22 of *Ormond*.⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin's important – pre-post-structuralist – theoretical concept of heteroglossia identifies the multiplicity of social voices that are linked and interrelated, dialogically, within the novel, and is particularly applicable to sections of *Ormond*. An example of the dialogic exchange engages three of the voices that would make up Edgeworth's imagined nation, in what appears to be a discussion about the grazing rights of a cow. At issue is the word 'consent'. Representing the dispossessed Gael is Peggy Moriarty, whose cow is forcing her way through Sir Ulick's hedge, into his estate, in pursuit of grass. Sir Ulick, the patriotic voice who wants to make politics work, is in constructive negotiation with Peggy. They relate to each other. Marcus, his obdurate son, refuses to budge from the thinking of his planter ancestors. Marcus is marginalized because he refuses to renew the language. He insists on seeing *consent* as something to be withheld, not shared. The future, it seems, belongs to Peggy and Sir Ulick. Both renew the word consent after considerable vertical argument with their ancestral voices. Sir Ulick's porous hedge replaces the binarist estate wall. He consents to share his grass with the Gael, who consents to accept the rights and language of his ethnic class through her renewed interpretation of the word trespass (unthinkable though that would have been to her ancestors).

This passage successfully imagines a resolution to Ireland's problem only insofar as those who participate in the dialogue relate to each other and are there because they want to be there – even the neutered Marcus. But the significant absentee from the piece is the Catholic priest, Father Jos – who represents Edgeworth's greatest fear, Catholic domination and with it the marginalisation of the Protestant voice in Ireland.

Edgeworth's fear of Catholicism is suggestive of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* of 1870s Germany. Its power base is located outside Ireland, and therefore it cannot be confined within or controlled by the geographical or constitutional boundaries envisaged by the National Tale. Unlike Marcus, Catholicism speaks a language that cannot be engaged with from within that discourse. Father Jos pronounces through speech that is deaf to others' responses. To him 'only one side . . . can be in the right'.⁵ Because he abuses the position of the pulpit, from where he can avoid telling bothersome truths to his flock, his is a privileged voice, immune to interference from any possible parliamentary arrangement and so capable of undermining it. Father Jos speaks the language of authoritarianism. To him the ecumenical Father McCormuck has been 'making too free'⁶ with the new Anglican parson, Dr Cambray. The key word in the lexicon of authoritarianism – into which he invests such import – is *faith*. 'I hope faith comes before reason', he admonishes King Corny.⁷ The reasoned arguments of parliamentary debate will be poor opposition for the certitude of the faithful. Like Mr Ramsey in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Father Jos's world works 'by abstract truths, sharp division and fixed essences'.⁸ His ideology will be

4 *Ibid.*, pp 163–6. 5 *Ibid.*, p. 111. 6 *Ibid.*, p. 112. 7 *Ibid.*, p. 113. 8 Terry Eagleton, *Literary theory: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 164.

privileged over the truth even to the extent of restricting his own use of language. If faults lie on both sides of a quarrel '[i]n church quarrels it don't become a good Catholic to say that'.⁹

Edgeworth is faced with a problem particular to Ireland that did not, for example, confront Jane Austen. Nor does she evade it, as Sydney Owenson does in *The wild Irish girl*, by having her hero trade his religion for reconciliation and thus crucially, silence his Protestant voice. Edgeworth is insistent on a heteroglossic solution to Ireland's problem yet knows that the power of the faith factor, if heteroglossia is contained within the national boundary, is insurmountable. Her response suggests more a failure of the National Tale than a failure of heteroglossia. If the discourse is confined within the national boundaries it will be restricted to the language of binarism; socialism and heteroglossia in one country are prone to repression. Father Jos must be unimaginatively confronted from the polarity of a Protestant argument, or else submitted to. The possibilities of a heteroglossic solution to the Irish predicament may end at Calais but Edgeworth, in imagining a universal language that transcends national and linguistic boundaries, allows the radically different Parisian voice into the discourse. Her insistent resistance to repression, her contempt for imposed borders, allows her to precociously suggest a language that goes beyond analysis through heteroglossic theory.

The language of binarism is implicitly acknowledged in the marriage of Harry to Florence Annaly. But the marriage does not represent a resolution to the problem of religious division in Ireland. This is a homogenous union, conceded defensively, that excludes Protestants from a heteroglossic Ireland and essentially submits to the will of Father Jos. The honest Annaly, dispassionate and reserved, isolate themselves from the milieu of Irish life. By confining their social interaction to those of their own religion and class – the Misses Lardner and Durell – they reduce the possibilities of their language to petty gossip. Rather than revitalize it through dialogic exchange with the other voices of Ireland – as Sir Ulick demonstrates through colourful exchanges with King Corny,¹⁰ they look to 'English travellers'¹¹ for accounts of Harry's exploits in Paris. The marriage represents the unsatisfactory preservation of a Protestant identity within the imagined Ireland of the National Tale. Harry and Florence withdraw into a language that has become 'inbred', and is sapped of its vitality. This retreat into itself can best be seen in an unconscious slip that is attributed to Dora, but that really represents beleaguered Protestantism. The slip intrudes on a discussion on Dora's upcoming marriage to White Connal. Harry, having saved her riding habit from spilled cream, is assailed by her contextually incongruous rebuttal – 'I'd rather manage my own affairs in my own way, if you'd let me Mr Ormond – if you'd leave me I can take care of myself my own way'.¹² This slip is really the voice of Protestant isolationism. It rejects Edgeworth's best efforts to construct, through the National Tale, a prescription for a heteroglossic Ireland.

9 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 111. 10 *Ibid.*, p. 38–45. 11 *Ibid.*, p. 242. 12 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Protestant primal fears force it to comply with the national malaise. It too will repress and reduce its vocabulary. It begs the Catholic voice to 'leave it' – clearly not a heteroglossic resolution to Ireland's problem.

Heteroglossia cannot survive in an Ireland where the faithful submit to Father Jos's logocentrism and where the dissenting voice withdraws to the periphery. It is not a situation that the author can allow to go uncontested. It is here that Father Jos comes to the rescue, for he emphasizes – ironically – the importance to Ireland of its links with the outside world. In a short – but key – passage of the novel he establishes the connection with France which will later introduce a new language to the discourse; a language that will subvert the binarist certitudes that control the language of Ireland. Father Jos has made his own of the language of absolutist France of Louis VIX. His coarse Hibernization of the 'adict of Nantz' represents it locally as something positive rather than being the revocation of an order that had granted freedom of expression to the Huguenots. The 'Hug-e-knows' now have become the 'Hug-e-nots', if we are to follow the logic of Father Jos's revisionist French. Read from a post-structuralist position the passage highlights the role of intertextuality in the novel. The language of the passage – so astutely chosen by Edgeworth – comes from a previous centre of French culture, but has been renewed to represent the ideology of a burgeoning centre of culture in Ireland. The diachronic has become synchronic. One might here usefully recall Roland Barthes' gratitude to Julia Kristeva for shifting him away 'from a semiology of products to a semiotics of production'.¹³ By importing language from outside the national boundary Father Jos creates a legitimate opportunity for Dora, Black Connal and Harry to respond in like manner. They introduce the frivolous language of pre-revolutionary Parisian society to the discourse – not as a counter but as a new voice, one that will disseminate the fixed essences of the entrenched Irish voices and that could never have emerged from within the Irish predicament as seen through *Ormond*.

That predicament is best seen through the marriage that should have taken place within a convincing National Tale – the marriage of Harry to Dora – but that cannot because of Edgeworth's fears. The union, symbolic of national unity within an autonomous Ireland, will necessitate Harry's move to the Black Islands, where the couple must contend with the hectoring interference of Father Jos – a kind of resident censor and disseminator of propaganda; a viceroy against whom Harry's voice would have little chance of survival. The ramifications of the union are imagined through King Corny's funeral. Harry, being the next-of-kin, is forced to be first to present his offering to an awesome display of clerical power – thirteen priests concelebrating the funeral mass. It is a predicament within which 'Ireland would be ruined',¹⁴ if she were unable to release herself. The isolation of the Protestant voice will lead to the end of dialogic exchange and the attenuating of all voices.

Edgeworth's response to Ireland's predicament is, in all aspects, subversive, as one would expect from a writer who is wilfully so. Assumptions of the role of the

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language* (New York: Columbia UP), 1984, pp 9–10.

¹⁴ Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 175.

Catholic church in Irish society, of the possibilities of the National Tale, of the cultural origins and allegiances of the various Irish identities are all systematically subverted and deconstructed. However, it is her subversion of the traditionally assumed relationship between Ireland and France that is interesting from the perspective of this essay. After Spain, France has been, historically, the nation which (unsuccessfully) comes to rescue Ireland from its colonial oppressor; this is also the case in *Ormond*. But here the intervention is arguably successful. The colonizer is not Britain but Rome and it is the language not the land that has been colonized. The Irish seek liberation not by French arms but through the language of Paris. Removed from Ireland, Dora, Black Connal, Mademoiselle O'Faley and Harry are free to challenge the oppressive certitude of their language through the profusion of meanings that the same words have released in pre-revolutionary Paris. In post-structuralist terms the ground on which binarism has been built is displaced both actually and philosophically. The unnatural boundaries that limit meaning have been breached; the infinite possibilities of language are subtly uncovered.

The reality of the National Tale is not at all to Edgeworth's liking; sentimental ecumenism and polite neighbourliness mask the inevitability of segregation, parochial philistinism and dictatorial rule by the strongest voice. She consciously subverts the assumptions bound into the National Tale through international tales from the Parisian venture. Father Jos has theologised the word *faith*: he has made it the transcendental signified of national unity when he proclaims it to be above reason. But by defining it through the system of differences he is acknowledging *faith's* relationship to reason. *Faith* can only exist if it comes before, or subordinates reason. Reason is the excluded outside but is also the repressed inside. Therefore it is textually related to the marriage of Harry and Florence and to the Huguenots, all of whom are outside the myth of *faith*. *Faith* assigns a singular meaning to national identity and expects a common allegiance to it. Though the English Annals and the French Huguenots exist outside the myth they live *inside* the national boundary. Thus they explode the idea of cultural distinctiveness, just as Father Jos does with political separateness (by being a representative of international Catholicism), both of which are intrinsic to the National Tale. Cultural distinctiveness, as enforced by Father Jos, will reduce language to the service of a given ideology – or rather his interpretation of it – as particularized in response to the Irish predicament.

Black Connal is a key protagonist in the deconstruction of the myth. Like his co-conspirators Dora and Mademoiselle O'Faley, he represents the ideal foundation blocks on which to build the National Tale. Catholic, of possible Old English stock that by now is accepted as Irish, and separated enough on class lines from his co-religionist wife, Dora, he 'proves' the unifying power of cultural identity. He has served in the Catholic Habsburg army and is an ideal officer, with the authority and status to implement culturally distinctive national policy in the politically separated Ireland of the National Tale. Alas, he has been corrupted by the intrusion of the voice of the repressed other, and thus he shares none of the singular zeal of Father Jos. Black is a kind of a fifth columnist, a trusted 'one of our own' who assaults the fable of the myth

and the boundaries of its language – not from a Protestant or English position, which would still be from within the language of binarism, but from that of Paris, the libertine capital of Catholic Europe. The myth of the National Tale is built on an image of a serious community which is church-going and stable in – usually arranged – marriage. Parisian culture, however seems to get along well without these impediments. Harry does not have time to ‘exclusively admire’ the churches from the outside but is impressed by ‘the fine façade of the Louvre’:¹⁵ and marriage, despite recurring infidelity, continues as a social norm. It is as if the interior of the word has been revolutionized while its outer form remains.

The authoritative interpretation in Ireland of the ‘word’ is challenged by that of Paris. Binarism is built on ‘seriousness’ – ‘it is your national fault’¹⁶ Black Connal accuses. But he displaces the ground beneath binarism – what Ireland wants is a certain degree of ‘lightness’ – rather than take sides in the Protestant-Catholic dialectic. *Lightness* however, is safely outside the discourse of Ireland, so it must be brought into association with the French *légèreté* – ‘for which you have no English word’,¹⁷ a process which will renew and add to its meaning. Music and rhythm is part of the heterogeneous extra that surrounds the word. Even if *légèreté* is Hibernicised into the semantically meaningless *lay-ger-tay*, or *lay-gera-tay*, *lay-ger-ateh*, *lay-jer-a-tay* – or one of numerous other possibilities – it still exudes an indefinable fascination that the prosaic *lightness* cannot. It is the case, as Roland Barthes writes, that ‘no thesis on the pleasure of the text is possible . . . and yet against and in spite of everything the text gives me bliss’.¹⁸ It is this pleasurable excess over meaning that, when brought into association with *lightness*, puts the socio-symbolic representation of *lightness* under stress. Previously excluded from the socio-symbolic order of Ireland, lightness is now, because of the attraction that *légèreté* adds to it, moving towards social acceptability, towards displacing *seriousness*. The process may be understood in the light of the Kristevan term *negativity*. ‘Negativity is the liquefying and dissolving agent that does not destroy but rather reactivates new organisations and in that sense, affirms’.¹⁹ And it is this crucial challenge to the symbolic, by what it has rejected, that destabilizes, reactivates and affirms. Even if *légèreté*, to revert to the French, translates as *lightness*, Black Connal is still right when he says you have no English for it. This is because *lightness* has acquired a social status in Paris – *lightness* can no longer be dismissed by the socio-symbolic order of Ireland. The Parisian culture of floating relationships and cosmopolitan relativism is no longer exclusive to the narrow certitude of Ireland; the space that divides the two may be more symbolic than real: for it is also a link, a means of communication, between the two locations.

The indeterminate language that has created Parisian culture cannot be reduced to the weighty language of Ireland. When Dora *et al* go there they find the certitude of familiar language subverted. Since *légèreté* has added substance to *lightness* – insists that its presence within the word be recognised – it has radically altered the position

15 Ibid., p. 200. 16 Ibid., p. 103. 17 Ibid. 18 Roland Barthes, *The pleasure of the text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 34. 19 Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language*, p. 109.

of lightness within the symbolic order. Being is no longer exclusively defined by seriousness. Edgeworth has transgressed logocentric absolutism by raising the rights of other possible interpretations of being and of the rights of such voices to be heard within the dominant discourse.

The word has been cleansed of corrosive grime and reactivated through the power of negativity. It is for this reason that Edgeworth relocates the language of Ireland in Paris. The exposure to the culture of *légèreté* is vital if its texture is to be made malleable. To be reorganized – like the Annals and the Huguenots – *lightness* is linked though the system of differences with that which is privileged over it. But it can never become, or be reactivated through negative dialectic with its binary opposite. Rather its meaning must be changed through negativity, through engagement with the heterogeneous extra that ‘works on moves through, and threatens it’,²⁰ in other words, with what has been confidently rejected by the stable symbolic order of Ireland. Negativity, Kristeva claims, ultimately leads to a fading of negation: ‘a surplus of negativity destroys the pairing of opposites and replaces opposition with an infinitesimal differentiation’.²¹ Once *légèreté* infiltrates *lightness* it establishes the credibility of *lightness*. The surplus of negativity that has done this has destroyed the binarist pairing that safely excluded *lightness*. *Seriousness* has lost its supreme authority and is dragged into the debate where it is now merely another possibility in the system of differences.

Kristeva's insights on the dissolving and reactivating possibilities of negativity help the reader to understand what is going on in the Parisian interlude of *Ormond*; they help the reader to witness, in the writing of Maria Edgeworth, the process of the production of poetic language. Let us in the interests of brevity focus on one example, one word, from the text to illustrate the point: that word is *faith*.

Faith has already been proclaimed by Father Jos as the word which signifies God – the word of the social and linguistic order that Edgeworth delights in disrupting; likewise the intention to join battle with the sign of God's authority has been signalled by the *légèreté* passage of chapter 15. That battle takes place in chapters 27–30, or thereabouts – a section of the text which is located in Paris and often dismissed as an escape from the real business of the novel. Here *faith* is relieved of the social, historical and religious assumptions that identified it in the Irish context, and reduced it to a singular meaning, a single signified. It now must take its place in the system of differences, alongside the heretofore unmentionable *unfaithful*. Dragged from its pinnacle it soon loses its mystique: ‘there is no mystery, no concealment’²² (in infidelity in marriage), Mademoiselle O’Faley explains. In the capital of *légèreté*, *faith* is a matter of taste, and so a relative term. Faithful and unfaithful move freely in the salon. The unfaithful are very much in the majority and absolutism is consigned to the past. That Le Comte de Belle Chasse cannot be ‘*absolutely* irresistible’ in libertine Paris is understood by Mademoiselle O’Faley. And even if the faithful are the distinctly uncool, ‘frightfully dressed’, or ‘cold as any English’,²³ they are still *inside*

20 Ibid., p. 81. 21 Ibid., pp 124–5. 22 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 204. 23 Ibid., p.

the salon and *inside* the language. Importantly that salon scene is not a reversal of the faithful flock who inhabit Father Jos's church to the exclusion of all others. In the salon the faithful have a voice, even if it is – at the moment – unfashionable. What has been excluded is absolutism, not just that of Louis XIV, who represents it politically, but the French precursors of Father Jos's language are 'banished [from] France'²⁴ through dissemination. Reference to Gayatri Spivak's explanation of dissemination as the seed that neither inseminates nor is recoverable by the Father, but is scattered abroad,²⁵ may help us better understand what is going on in this passage. Edgeworth is aware of the passions engendered by absolutist centres of culture when language is appropriated to serve the singularity of its cause. King Corny wouldn't give a farthing for a man that couldn't be in a passion on a 'proper occasion'.²⁶ But, as the passions that united the culture dissipate, meaning comes under attack. King Corny likes himself for being 'reasonably passionate' but, however, frequently repents. So, as the passion experienced by absolutist France in the moment of dissemination dissipates, the certitude of the language that accompanies it is challenged and its meaning becomes engaged in the play of textuality between Ireland, where it is scattered, and Paris. Thus Father Jos's certitude fastens onto *Hug-o-nots* but the semen, the meaning, cannot impregnate Ireland's culture. It is now a bastard child of the *Hug-e-know* of Parisian language that has lurched along the endless chain of signifiers. So when the text of Ireland is engaged with the text of libertine Paris, as in *faith*, instead of reassurance in the absolute singular meaning of the father, it meets and is in turn disseminated within a play of endless meanings: instead of passion it meets a void where passion had been. Harry can now hope to pursue Dora – his former obsession – 'without feelings, without scruple'.²⁷

If the text of this passage yields a reading that explodes the myth of the National Tale and disseminates the singularity of its language, if it represents an ideal of language liberated from ideology and from meaning, it may represent the semiotic in the Kristevan sense. But of course that semiotic is in crisis within the symbolic order. Just as the whole passage can be read as the gap that enlightens the narrative, the gap between *faith* that is before reason, and *faith* Parisian style, represents the crucible wherein poetic language is being forged; where meaning is transforming and reactivating. Dora in Paris cannot suddenly leap from valorized *faith* and stable marriage to the fecklessness of *à la carte faith*. Black Connal's advice, 'don't aim at correctness',²⁸ is attempted by Dora. Thwarted opportunity may have preserved her from infidelity with Harry; she rejoices in having the Compté 'in her chains'; she is numbered among those faithful to their husbands but not among the 'uncool'. She neither bends too low nor holds herself too high. Dora may struggle to rid herself of the hold of 'old' *faith* but her singular vision is illuminated by the salon 'blazing with lights, reflected on all sides'²⁹ and she still faints when she first meets Harry in Paris.

205. 24 Ibid., p. 111. 25 Gayatri Spivak, 'Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), pp xiv–xv. 26 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 48. 27 Ibid., p. 203. 28 Ibid., p. 205. 29 Ibid., p. 201.

The representation of the symbolic order of Ireland exerts as powerful a pull in one direction as does the temptation to be unfaithful with Harry, in the other. Dora represents not hybridity but the stage where both senses of *faith* are of valid meaning and equal in their attraction; the absolutist *faith* of Ireland on the one hand opposed to *légèreté*, the *faith* of Parisian society on the other. Dora may be nostalgic for meaning but the pull of the liberated word is scarcely resistible. She is the crucible, the embodiment of *différance*, the disseminated seed moving through time, that can neither return to the father, nor impregnate an uncertain destination.

Could the accusation of hybridity be levelled against Edgeworth at the end of chapter 28? Is she here closing off the possibilities of a deconstructive reading and settling for a *stable* compromise to the predicament of Ireland? 'Riding was just coming into high fashion with the French ladies' and it was their ambition 'to ride on a side saddle'.³⁰ A horse and English side-saddle is procured for Dora who impresses all and sundry with her 'horsemanship'. The English decentred saddle could well unconsciously represent a resolution to the Franco-Irish dilemma – an agreed point between the certitude of the Irish logoi and Parisian libertine ways. Her seat signals her rejection of the logoi but also her intent to fight to change it from within. It may even suggest the freezing of the meaning of *faith* at a certain point in its struggle for renewal. This is not however the end of the matter. Hybridity may seem to imply an end to the task of deconstruction but it also inherently suggests, in Homi K. Bhabha's phrase, 'a third space'³¹ where binary differences will be continuously broken down. We should recall that Edgeworth delights in how 'we like to see how strangers play with our language'³² and this should distance us from falling for a static model of hybridity. In any case, to reach a compromise, to bring closure to the Irish predicament, seems out of character with the subversive drive that compels Edgeworth. She is a permanent revolutionary rather than a deal-fixer. Hybridity infers stasis. Rejecting it we should look for movement in the text: movement that suggests the continuous reactivating process taking place within the word *faith*. The language in this paragraph sparkles with movement: '[t]he spring was now appearing'; '[r]iding was just coming into high fashion'; Dora 'was ambitious to show her . . . horsemanship'.³³ It is clear from her seat on the horse that she is contemptuous towards the logoi. But of equal significance the rolling action of the horse on which Dora is seated suggest the continuous movement or rolling over of meaning, of its formation, dissolution, re-formation – its infinite futile attempts to catch up with the present. Moreover it demonstrates, of course, the rejection of 'Faith above reason' but also, of far greater significance, a subtly told understanding of dissemination. While Black, Mademoiselle O'Faley and Harry embrace *légèreté*, Dora is holding back, conscious that it is of the past.

In *Ormond* Maria Edgeworth acknowledges and then confronts the religious divide that is central to the problems of Ireland. By so doing she allows herself the

30 Ibid., p. 203. 31 Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Deconstruction: a reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), p. 14. 32 Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond*, p. 199. 33 Ibid., p. 213.

freedom to give names to the positions, to represent the passions of the moment, and to then demolish their certitude. She permits what Julia Kristeva calls the 'completion of the thetic phase'.³⁴ This recognition in turn releases her creativity. She imagines new possibilities for Ireland that must be explored through a language that has been forged beyond its boundaries – language that contemptuously asks questions of Ireland's binarism. The French connection in *Ormond* is, to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, the passage that asks the questions.³⁵ No doubt Edgeworth sees Catholicism as an oppressive force and greatly fears its power. But the battle against the myth and language through which that power is projected is not an end in itself – this would deny her the earned status of subversive – but one more strategy in the war against her constant quarry, fixed meaning. The narrative of *Ormond* makes a valiant attempt to justify the National Tale: that it has survived for so long and been accepted by so many is a tribute to Edgeworth's skills. And of course, the argument for is never overthrown, just subverted. After all, most of the protagonists live happily ever after. That subversion is at work through the novel, but is orchestrated from the off-centre cornerstone of the Parisian venture. From here tension is exerted. Sleepers like *légèreté* and *faith* are summoned to duty. They prove, not the supremacy of the cornerstone – this would be merely binarist – but the inherent instability of the structure of which they are already a part. Both are in flux, disseminated, in the process of becoming, incessantly asking questions – deconstructing the language that makes up the National Tale.

34 Kristeva, *Revolution in poetic language*, p. 63. 35 Adrienne Rich, 'Notes towards a politics of location', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds), *Literary theory: an anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 645.