Imperfect Concord: Spectres of History in the Irish Novels of Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan

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The dual modes of realism and romance are frequently used as a convenient means of charting opposing tendencies in the history of the novel. At first glance, the work of Maria Edgeworth and of Lady Morgan would appear to illustrate these polarities. Where Edgeworth spearheads the use of naturalism and of social realism in her rational fictions about Ireland, Lady Morgan by contrast initiates and promotes a romantic and mythical view of the country and its history in her novels.[1] Edgeworth's highlighting of the intricacies of social interaction cede to a rival emphasis in the work of Lady Morgan on the alluring but threatening sublimity of the Irish landscape and of its inhabitants. On closer inspection, however, this neat dichotomy breaks down.

This essay aims to trace the continuities and differences between two novels by these interrelated writers which were published in the aftermath of the Act of Union in 1801. The texts which I shall examine are Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812) and Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806).[2] I shall argue that the initial counterpoint between the enlightened utopianism of Edgeworth and the Gothic romanticism of Lady Morgan masks the shared political and aesthetic concerns of their work. In thus cross-comparing and picking out points of connection between their novels, my purpose is to consider the difficulties which both writers encounter in simultaneously depicting the vicissitudes and conflicts of Irish history whilst yet outlining a resolution of the political problems of the country.

I shall make the case that the attempt by Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan to write totalising fictions which use a moment of social concord to achieve a form of closure is countermanded by the contradictions and conflicts in Irish society which their work exposes. My argument will be not so much that their imaginations and political sympathies are at odds, as critics frequently contend, but that their very means of envisioning and emplotting Irish colonial history and its fateful consequences are themselves divided and riven.[3] Both writers, it

1 For an account of the philosophical underpinnings of the work of these writers, see Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1972) and J.T. Leerssen, 'How *The Wild Irish Girl* Made Ireland Romantic' in *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 18 (1988), pp. 209–27. 2 *The Absentee*, edited by W.J. McCormack and Kim Walker (Oxford, 1988); *The Wild Irish Girl* (London, 1986). 3 Terry Eagleton, in his account of the formation of the Anglo-Irish novel, contends that there is a tension between the ideological beliefs and the imaginative insights of Edgeworth and Lady Morgan. See *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995), pp. 145–225.

will be seen, produce hybrid fictions which are seamed with doublings, hauntings and ambiguities which remain obdurately at odds with the harmonious endings which round out their texts.[4] Their composite creations combine aspects of the courtship novel and of the romance with panoramic surveys of Irish history, culture and society.

Both writers too use the viewpoint of the dispossessed outsider in order to constitute a vantage point from which to make sense of the entangled affairs of the country. The difference of Ireland is apparently lessened and made more amenable in their novels because it is looked at from the perspective of an other, a sympathetic visitor who is finally revealed to have a claim on the place because he is the disaffected son of an absentee landlord. Edgeworth and Lady Morgan ultimately endeavour to domesticate the wildness and intractability of Irish history by turning their sprawling accounts of the political conflicts which impede the cause of progress and of national cohesion into forms of family romance.[5] The hero reconfirms his stake in the country by embarking on a marriage which represents a strategic and problematic fusion of the interests of native and colonist. The prior education of the hero is made, however, contingent on this putatively happy outcome. Hence, Lord Colambre in *The Absentee* and Horatio Mortimer in *The Wild Irish Girl* are both exposed to conflicting aspects of their environment which permit them to reflect on and revise their attitudes.

However, the marriage of the hero hinges not just on the expansion of his sensibility and understanding but also on the re-establishment of his claims as a landowner and the renegotiation of the identity of the woman who becomes his wife. In each case the construing of the 'Irishness' of the heroine complicates and in part undermines what the protagonist has come to know about the country. As a consequence, the marriages which act as tentative signs of political resolution at the endings of these two novels prove simultaneously to be highly ambiguous renderings of the union between Ireland and England which they in part mirror. Unlike English domestic fictions of the same period in which, as Nancy Armstrong argues, the private sphere slowly begins to eclipse the public world, the sexual contract which is symbolically realised through the marriage of the revitalised landlord and his Irish bride with her refurbished national identity never succeeds in displacing the problems attached to the problematic social contract on which a colonial society is based.[6] Romance proves an uneasy solution to the political difficulties of Ireland.

4 For a discussion of the pervasive use of gothic conventions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, see Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford, 1995) and Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Origins of the Irish Female Gothic' in *Bullán*, 1 (1994), pp. 35–45. **5** Christine van Boheemen analyses the way in which the plotting of the identity and the establishment of the family origins of an orphaned outsider is a recurrent theme of the novel in different eras. See *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender and Authority From Fielding to Joyce* (Ithaca, 1987). **6** Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford, 1987).

Both Edgeworth and Lady Morgan set out to combat false representations of Ireland by providing accounts of the country which are authentic and accurate. Prejudiced misrepresentations are thus to be countered by a new political vision which attempts to avoid the distortions and errors of the past. The sins of the fathers, their novels suggest, can be cancelled out by the actions of sons who know and experience Ireland in an altogether different fashion. Empirical reportage and the establishment of authentic local colour are as a result signal aspects of their work. The oedipal rivalry between generations becomes part of this process whereby the present cancels out and makes good former atrocities. The past has to be known and acknowledged before it can be overcome. However, although their work presents a corrective portrait of the Irish and of Irish history and points to the injustices perpetrated during the several centuries of English government and mismanagement, it also betrays a fear that Anglo-Irish relations will always be punctuated by crises and conflicts. A sense of irresolution lies at the heart of the fictional solutions proffered by these two narratives.

In what follows, I shall argue that different and contradictory representations of Ireland vie for attention in *The Absentee* and *The Wild Irish Girl*. Although both authors have the purpose of readjusting our views of Ireland by producing didactic fictions which enable us to distinguish between veracious and distorted descriptions of the country and its people, both find that their subject escapes them or that they cannot fully marry the lessons of history with the utopian solutions of fiction. Both texts uncover and insist upon the connections between politics and aesthetics and demonstrate that the manner in which we view a people and a society materially affects the judgements which we make about them.

However, it is this very premise, the impossibility of dissevering seeing from judging, which leads to the many moments of contradiction in these narratives. Borrowing a set of terms from Jacques Derrida's suggestive re-interpretation of Marx, I propose that *The Absentee* and *The Wild Irish Girl* represent the fictional Irelands conjured up by their authors as rooted in a type of 'spectropolitics'.[7] Although neither of these texts would seem at first glance to be a Gothic fiction, they both contain uncanny effects which take the form of displacements, ghostly doublings, and coincidences. As a result, these novels indicate that Ireland is not just a space onto which people project various competing political visions which can be assessed according to their ethical or moral worth, but that the many conflicting representations of the country uncannily repeat and duplicate each other and hence elude the magisterial scrutiny of the author's political vision.

Both Edgeworth and Lady Morgan use the device of the travel narrative in order to review Irish history and politics. Lord Colambre and Horatio Mortimer undertake a kind of sentimental journey which allows them to experience at first hand the plight of the Irish and to make them painfully aware of the inadequacies and abuses of the landlord system in the country. As outsiders who have a secret

7 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning and The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London, 1994).

connection with this strange land through which they travel, they waver between a subjective and objective view of Irish society. They react to a world which is at once an alien space and their future abode or home. As Derrida explains, the strange familiarity associated with the spectre depends upon its visibility. However, paradoxically, the visibility of a ghost is a visibility of the invisible:

> The spectre appears to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present itself, in flesh and blood. The non-presence of the spectre demands that one take its time and its history into consideration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity.[8]

In the interpretations that follow I shall suggest that Edgeworth and Lady Morgan focus on the spectral presence of Ireland in their narratives in order to illustrate its singularity and the materiality of its political and social conflicts. However, at the same time, the country that they describe seems like Derrida's spectre to be caught in a temporal dimension of its own, forever trapped in a past that refuses to be either fully present or to accord with a utopian vision of the future. In addition, while the spectropolitical vision of Ireland in *The Absentee* and *The Wild Irish Girl* problematises and extends our view of the place, it also has aspects of a negative conjuration or haunting. As Derrida points out, the *revenant* or ghost can be either a welcome or a dreaded apparition. It can alternatively be a *Geist* in the positive sense of spirit or essence, or a *Gespenst* in the negative sense of a spook or phantom. The spectral Irelands portrayed by Edgeworth and Lady Morgan hover precariously between these two spheres; their novels both conjure up an amenable and forward-looking vision of the country and depict it as a space of uncanny repetitions, visitations and hauntings.

The rambling journeys of the heroes of *The Absentee* and of *The Wild Irish Girl* through Irish history and society are given contour by contrasting notions of the aesthetic. While the key term in Edgeworth's novel is that of taste, the crucial concept in Lady Morgan's novel is that of the sublime. By tracing in turn the manner in which these concepts inform the political re-education of their respective protagonists, it is possible also to examine the moments of ambivalence which threaten to undermine the apparently demonstrable political theses of these texts.

The moral worth of Lord Colambre in *The Absentee* and the gradual emergence of his desire to get to know Ireland are initially signalled by his repugnance for London taste. The effete values of the metropolis are exposed in the descriptions of his mother's inept attempts to be accepted by English society. The soirées which she holds in order to ingratiate herself with the snobbish custodians of London fashion are characterised by their empty pageantry and cultural eclecticism. By decorating her rooms in various Oriental and African styles, she merely mirrors the parasitical and decentred nature of English upper class society. The decadence of this community seems to be less the result of its cannibalisation and appropriation

8 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 101.

of other cultures than of its incapacity to realise the connection between aesthetic and moral interests. The dependence of Colambre's father on a Jewish money-lender provides a further illustration of the moral errancy of this Anglo-Irish family which is dangerously adrift in English society. By transforming Irish colonial capital into the empty signs of English class distinction, Colambre's mother moreover highlights her own moral blindness and failure to live up to her political responsibilities. Colambre, by contrast, seeks to close the gap between objects and values. Eschewing the world of fashion and declaring at one point that he has no taste at all, he heads off for Ireland in order to discover for himself the true nature of the place. Initially, thus, the narrative seems to suggest that Ireland is the inverse of England: a counterfoil to English decadence and moral dissolution, it is intimated to be a place of innocence, purity, and originary natural virtue. Colambre, it would appear, moves from the greed and rapacity of England to the unpolluted domain of Ireland where society is not held hostage to base materialism.

However, his experience of Ireland from his very first approach to Dublin is also mediated by an interleaving of framing visions and competing ideologies. Colambre's identity is no less dubious and unstable in this other world. Alienated from London, he enters his country of origin as an alien. Ireland too, the text shows, is created by conflicting and potentially corrupting tastes and fashions. Colambre's initial experiences of his lost homeland are as disorientating as any of his mother's inept social pastiches. In swift succession, he learns of the superiority of Dublin life, sees the vulgar display of the Raffarty estate in Wicklow, is brow-beaten by the jaundiced, English fortune-hunter, Lady Dashfort, and is charmed by the benign but befuddled antiquarianism of Count O' Halloran.[9]

Following this bewildering patchwork of impressions, the text attempts to channel our perceptions and the moral choices of its protagonist by cross-comparing in what would seem a schematic way the behaviour of the two agents employed by Colambre's father, Mr Burke and Nick Garraghty. The opposing worlds of these two men are presented in polar terms: the domain of the good agent is redolent of order and progress while that of the corrupt agent epitomises disorder and anarchy. However, this alluringly simple object lesson which nestles inside all of the other warring frameworks on Ireland which have hitherto been proffered to Colambre leads to further complexities. The very doubling that occurs through the stark opposition of good and evil estate management suggests that the society which Colambre visits is inherently unstable and divided. This instability is made all the more evident through the disguise which Colambre is forced to adopt for most of the course of the novel. He visits his father's estates, *incognito*, as a *revenant* wrapped in a self-effacing cloak. On one level, this image of the masked landlord with his occluded identity acts as a reification of the moral obfuscation which has resulted from the mismanagement of the family property.

9 For an illuminating discussion of these assorted scenes and figures, see W.J. McCormack, *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History From 1789 to 1939* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 123–168.

However, on another level, it would seem that Colambre himself has been forced into the role of spectre. His alias ironically casts him as the ghost in the machine and shows him to be as much the cause of, as the solution, to the problems from which his father's tenants are suffering.

Despite the anomaly of his position, Colambre draws the correct conclusions from these vivid illustrations of how landlords should and should not comport themselves. He finally acts in accordance with that enlightened and paternalist landlordism favoured by Edgeworth and her father.[10] However, his justification of his actions and retrospective account of what he has seen from the postillon window and learnt from the narrative of Larry Brady, the loyal family retainer who roundly denounces Garraghty, are curious:

> The higgling for the price of the gold; the time lost in disputing about the goodness of the notes, among some poor tenants, who could not read or write, and who were at the mercy of the man with the bag in his hand; the vexation, the useless harrassing of all who were obliged to submit ultimately – Lord Colambre saw: and all this time he endured the smell of tobacco and whiskey, and the sound of various brogues, the din of men wrangling, brawling, threatening, whining, drawling, cajoling, cursing, and every variety of wretchedness.
>
> And is this my father's town of Clonbrony? thought Lord Colambre. Is this Ireland? No, it is not Ireland. Let me not like most of those who forsake their native country, traduce it. Let me not, even to my own mind, commit the injustice of taking a speck for the whole. What I have just seen is the picture only of that to which an Irish estate and Irish tenantry may be degraded in the absence of those whose duty and interest it is to reside in Ireland, to uphold justice by example and authority; but who neglecting this duty, commit power to bad hands and bad hearts – abandon their tenantry to oppression, and their property to ruin.[11]

It is striking that Colambre refuses here to see the squalid, debased Ireland which he has visited as anything other than a 'picture'. Although he has come face to face with the harsh realities of landlordism and particularly of the absentee system, he cannot accept his unvarnished vision of the country except in mediated and symbolic terms. He spectralises what he has seen and places it inside a picture frame in order to keep it distant from himself. Despite his rejection of taste and of the false perspectives offered by fashionable culture, he still insists on viewing Ireland within aesthetic and epistemological frameworks which involve a denial

10 For an analysis of the complex and contradictory political position of Edgeworth and her family, see Tom Dunne, *Maria Edgeworth and the Colonial Mind* (Cork, 1984); idem, '"A Gentleman's Estate Should be a Moral School": Edgeworthstown in Fact and Fiction, 1760–1840' in Raymond Gillespie and Gerard Moran (eds), *Longford: Essays in County History* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 95–121; and Michael Hurst, *Maria Edgeworth and the Public Scene: Intellect, Fine Feeling and Landlordism in the Age of Reform* (London, 1969). **11** Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, p. 162.

as well as an acceptance of what he has witnessed. By delimiting his experience of Ireland in this manner, he enables himself to perform the righteous actions which are required of him. However, he simultaneously places himself at a remove from the injustices exposed. Colambre establishes his presence as a landlord by keeping himself outside of this framed perspective which threatens to reveal too much about the inequities of the colonial system in Ireland. It is as if the text has perforce to bury some of the political insights which it brings to light because they have implications which do not coincide with the morality which it propounds. In keeping with the Kantian adage, Colambre has the courage to use his own understanding in coming to terms with the chaotic and disturbing nature of Irish social reality.[12] Yet, equally, he has to acknowledge the limitations on his freedom before putting into effect the meliorating social philosophy which Edgeworth and her father saw as the fitting basis of enlightened landlordism. In considering the proper uses of unfettered thought, Kant came to the conclusion that 'the public use of man's reason must always be free and it alone can bring about Enlightenment among men; the private use of reason may be quite seriously restricted'.[13]

At this juncture in the narrative, Edgeworth's hero seems to limit the radicalism of his own insights by restricting the ambit of his private powers of reason. While his public self is ready to denounce Garraghty for his corruption and inhumanity, his private self dissociates itself from the knowledge of such evil. Of course, Edgeworth uses this scene in part to convey to us the refinement of Colambre's sensibilities which make him back off in distress from the brute reality of Ireland. The text, however, begs the question as to whether the right-minded son of an erstwhile absentee landlord will ever be in a position to see the 'real' Ireland which he desires. The framed and spectral scene from which he turns away seems to have as its counterpart another more ghostly scene which the text is incapable of depicting. The advent of Colambre's beneficent regime lies beyond the horizon of our field of vision in a vague future which the ending of the novel firmly and ironically holds in abeyance.

An earlier episode in the tale illustrates why Colambre ultimately finds it necessary to excise from his memory certain aspects of Irish life in order to hold things within bounds. In a scene in which the discomfiting otherness of the country threatened to engulf him, he is evicted along with Widow O'Neill from her cottage. In a curious overlaying of dispossessions, the eviction of a native Irish tenant from her land dovetails with the expulsion of the absentee landlord from his estate. The incident of course forms part of Colambre's empirical education; he experiences at first hand the grievances of his tenants by partaking in the

12 Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?' in *Kant's Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss and translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 54–60. At the beginning of this essay, Kant declares that 'sapere aude!' or 'have the courage to use your own understanding' is the motto of the Enlightenment. 13 *Kant's Political Writings*, p. 55. For a summary of the contradictions of Enlightenment philosophy, see Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–13.

eviction. The English audience for which the text was intended would presumably have taken greater umbrage at this injustice because it is so patently absurd.

However, the ambiguity of the scene belies these simple didactic objectives. The double eviction of landlord and tenant indicates a moment of irresolution and almost of political deadlock. Both coloniser and colonised seem equal victims of this system of misrule. The dual injustices which Colambre and Widow O'Neill jointly experience shade into each other and the plight of the absentee English landlord seems almost to eclipse that of the native Irish. The text appears to have to disavow as well as acknowledge the corruption of the landlord system. It makes it visible as an invisibility. In addition the scene enacts, in an oblique fashion, a general fear of native Irish retaliation which the novel represses. The threat of a peasant rebellion against an unjust system is converted here into a phantom but ultimately harmless eviction of the landlord by his own conniving agent.

Similarly, the text leavens and somehow short-circuits the injustices caused by absenteeism through the constant interjection of the comic commentary of Larry Brady, the loyal retainer of the Colambre family. His language and witticisms act as a shield that buffers the protagonist against too close an encounter with the hardship which is a direct result of his family's pursuit of taste and fashion. Moreover, Brady is a ghostly double of an earlier pivotal figure in Edgeworth's work, Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent*. Unlike his predecessor, this revised version of the family retainer is marked by his unswerving loyalty and innocent devotion. However, his garrulousness and disingenuous chatter whilst recalling Thady's self-serving deviousness serve the further function of keeping the spectre of disloyalty at bay.[14]

The shift of perceptions which enables the rehabilitation of the identity of Colambre's cousin, Grace Nugent, depends upon a similar pattern of acceptance and denial, seeing and not seeing. As with his experience of Ireland, Colambre seems initially to have to deny the evidence of his senses which persuade him of her fundamental virtue before he can succeed in vindicating her and saving her reputation. By the end of the novel, his penniless Irish cousin has transmogrified into an English heiress. All of the numerous associations with Irishness, illegitimacy and scandal which have tainted her reputation have been removed. She swaps her original surname, which, as W.J. McCormack has pointed out, potentially connects her with dissident Irish nationalism, for an English name, Reynolds.[15] Only after this transformation is the marriage between Colambre and herself possible. The heroine has, thus, to be rewritten and to become her own ghostly double before she can take up her predestined role as the wife of an Anglo-Irish landlord. The re-naming of Grace Nugent reminds us of the precarious nature of identity in a colonial society. Her symbolic marriage with Colambre comes about only when her virtue is translated into English terms and she is absolved of any connection with Catholic Ireland.

14 Marilyn Butler analyses the political objectives underlying the depiction of Thady. See *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, edited by Marilyn Butler (London, 1995), pp. 1–54.
15 McCormack argues that the Nugent family would have had particular associations with recusancy and Jacobite politics. See 'Introduction', *The Absentee*, pp. xxii–xxv.

The ending of the novel, however, demonstrates that such convenient exorcisms of social tensions do not hold good. Instead of a final view of Colambre, we are treated instead to a re-play of events in a letter of Larry Brady to his brother in England which describes the recent reinstatement of Lord and Lady Clonbrony on their demesne. Brady concludes his missive with a request to his absentee brother, a tenant farmer who had been driven from his holdings by the evil Garraghty, also to return home. This recursive letter thus suggests that the consolidation of benevolent English rule of Irish society will be borne out by the desire of the native population to accept this new and enlightened regime.

The question of ghostliness, however, still hovers over the text. As Derrida comments, it is one of the aspects of the spectre that it sees you before you see it.[16] Brady, by having the final say, spectralises the revenant landlords for us. In superimposing his vision on theirs, he dislocates the presence which they seem to have established in the country. Further, he diverts our attention to the abiding problem of the political role which will be played by the native Irish in this regime which is not of their making. His witty but portentous dislocation of the term 'absentee' to describe his brother's enforced exile implicitly raises the question as to whether the mutual presence of the Anglo-Irish landlord and Irish tenant will not still involve future banishments, exiles and conflicts of interest. The healing salve of Brady's comic and genial rewriting of the plot uneasily masks the political rivalries which remain a constant aspect of colonial society. The conflicts which Edgeworth's novel attempts to circumvent and defuse seem to be always already inscribed in the spectropolitical discourses which haunt her fiction.

Horatio Mortimer (H.M.), the hero of Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl*, similarly discovers Ireland to be a site of ambivalence. Like Colambre, he travels to Ireland in order to restore himself, to banish the ill-effects of English dissipation, and to become acquainted with his neglected patrimony, the decaying estates of his absentee father. H.M. oscillates between approbation of the romantic aspects of Irish culture and dismay at its uncouthness. In particular, he seems to be torn between two countervailing attitudes towards the sublimity of the Irish landscape. At the beginning of his trip, he revels in its untamed qualities and uses the pleasurable feelings of terror which it inspires to secure his identity. The following passage describes his reaction to the scenery in an unspecified part of the west of Ireland:

> Mountain rising over mountain, swelled like an amphitheatre to those clouds which, faintly tinged with the sun's prelusive beams, and rising from the earthly summits where they had reposed, incorporated with the kindling aether of a purer atmosphere. All was silent and solitary – a tranquillity tinged with terror, a sort of 'delightful horror', breathed on every side. I was alone, and felt like the presiding genius of desolation![17]

16 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 101. 17 Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl*, p. 7.

Here, it is clear that H.M. gives in to the painful transports of the sublime in order ultimately to reassert control over himself. The overwhelming spectacle of the mountains allows him to secure and anchor himself in his solitary identity.[18] He is transformed through this aesthetic experience from an anonymous spectator into 'the presiding genius of desolation'. In such moments, he is exposed to what David Morris describes as the eighteenth-century sublime which occurs primarily 'in a world of stable meanings, where interpretation is not openly at issue'.[19] By contrast the feelings of terror and mystery which are sparked off by H.M.'s contemplation of the castle of Inismore and its inhabitants, as he ventures further into the vortex of Irish wildness, plunge him into that state of dislocation and disempowerment linked with the Gothic sublime. The contradictory emotions of fear and fascination conjured up by this negative encounter with the sublime ultimately centre on the figure of Glorvina, the wild Irish girl herself.

Glorvina is described as an impossible amalgam of nature and culture, innocence and mystery, desire and terror. As the final member of a moribund Gaelic tribe, she is at once *Geist*, the distillation of this lost Irish civilisation, and *Gespenst*, a ghost from an irredeemably remote past. A nightmare which H.M. experiences during his sojourn in this final ruined outpost of Gaelic supremacy makes evident the lurking horror which he paradoxically links with her beguiling seductiveness:

> What had I to expect from the unpolished manners, the confined ideas of this Wild Irish Girl? Deprived of all those touching allurements which society only gives; reared in wilds and solitudes, with no other associates than her nurse, her confessor, and her father; endowed indeed by nature with some personal gifts, set off by the advantage of a singular and characteristic dress, for which she is indebted to whim and natural prejudice, rather than native taste: I who had fled in disgust from even those whose natural attraction the bewitching blandishments of education, the brilliant polish of fashion, and the dazzling splendour of real rank, contributed their potent spells ...
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> While given up to such reflections as these – while the sound of the Irish harp arose from the hall below, and the nurse muttered her prayers in Irish over her beads by my side, I fell into a gentle slumber, in which I dreamed that the Princess of Inismore approached my bed, drew aside the curtains, and raising her veil, discovered a face I had hitherto rather guessed at, than seen. Imagine my horror – it was the face, the head, of a *Gorgon*![20]

18 For an examination of the role of the sublime in literature of this period, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York, 1959), Neil Hertz, 'The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime' in Geoffrey H. Hartman *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text* (Baltimore, 1978), and Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, 1976). **19** David Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity' in *New Literary History*, 16 (1985), pp. 299–319 (p. 299). **20** Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl*, p. 51.

In construing the unspeakable dread with which he associates Glorvina, Lady Morgan's hero invokes a confused array of gothic images. The wild Irish girl in his feverish imaginings is a composite of oriental dancer, classical monster and succubus. Ultimately, the narrative shows that the spectral ambiguities of Glorvina are an emanation not just of her ethnic otherness but of the rapacity of his own family. The gothic sublimity of the Castle of Inismore has as its absent cause the depredations of colonialism. H.M. finds that the double with which he has to grapple is, in fact, his father who has planned to marry the wild Irish girl and thus ensure his sovereignty over her lands.

By ousting his father and himself becoming Glorvina's husband, it is intimated that the hero has in some way countered the horrors of corrupt landlordism. At the end of the text, H.M. is charged with the task of bringing back into 'renovating life' the 'national virtues' of the Irish. Yet, despite the optimism inspired by this symbolic marriage that represents an ideal fusion of English and Irish interests, it still remains open as to what kind of future this happy ending actually heralds. In the closing moments of the novel, the wild Irish girl is eclipsed by the distant prospect of the complete restoration of the ideals of Gaelic culture by this reformed Anglo-Irish landlord. She is transformed from a nightmare vision of the violence and losses of Irish history into a comforting and prophetic dream of a harmonious future. Glorvina becomes the cultural capital and symbolic reservoir for the romantic nationalism that Lady Morgan proposes. The ghostly traces and gothic horrors of the past will be converted into the spirit of an ideal future. However, the erasure of Glorvina from the final pages of the novel seems a measure of the absences and cancellations on which even this optimistic spectropolitical vision depends.

In *The Absentee* and *The Wild Irish Girl* Edgeworth and Lady Morgan produce political fictions that are at once enlightened, conciliatory and riddled with ambiguity. Their land-owning heroes define themselves in terms of their Irishness and of their responsibilities as governors of a colonial society. In addition, both texts insist that the work of achieving national harmony in Ireland is dependent on the mediating presence of women who precariously straddle the divide between Anglo-Irish landlords and their Irish tenants. However, in the final reckoning, the belief of these writers in a future which will be uncontaminated by the conflicts of the past is persistently undermined by the spectres of history which haunt their texts.