

Anachronistic Aesthetics: Maria Edgeworth and the “Uses” of History

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ABSTRACT

Scholars often understand Maria Edgeworth as a belated Enlightenment writer in a Romantic age because she seeks to organize both her fiction and the history it represents so that they can be put to use. In this article, however, I argue that Maria Edgeworth’s Irish writing legitimates lived relationships between past and present that her politics wished to eradicate. Although she attempts to periodize within her fiction to shape a useful history—separating past and present in order to bring about an imagined future—her anachronistic aesthetics unsettle her historical periods and show the political value of discordance, contingency, and historical misuse. Focusing especially on *An Essay on Irish Bulls* and *Castle Rackrent*, I consider how Edgeworth’s anachronisms imagine political possibilities that do not simply support either union with England or Irish nationalism. The heterogeneity created by portable aesthetic forms—whether literary language that transcends its historical context or forms of metalepsis that propel readers forward and backward in time—foster transhistorical relationships that expand our understanding of the present and imagine a more open future.

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In *Essays on Practical Education* (1798), Maria Edgeworth teaches her readers to cultivate memory by making it serve general principles. Adopting a rational approach to the messy business of remembering, she writes: “Men of sense, who cultivate their memories for useful purposes, are not obliged to treasure up heterogeneous facts: by reducing particulars to general principles, and by connecting them with proper associations, they enjoy all the real advantages, whilst they are exempt from the labour of accumulation.”¹ For Edgeworth, memories are important only to the extent that they are “useful,” and are useful to the extent that they bear out general principles. Enabling the future rather than conjuring up the past, memories should be shaped, formed, and stripped of their contingencies so that they can be put to use.

Edgeworth’s commitment to education, improvement, and Enlightenment rationality renders such advice unsurprising. Yet, when read alongside her novels—especially her novels set in Ireland—this advice raises significant questions about the relations between heterogeneous facts and general principles, historical contingency and utility, and fiction and history.² Within her Irish novels, Edgeworth attempts to shape history as the “men of sense” shape memory: she connects Irish “facts” and “particulars” to “general principles,” showing that, despite historical and cultural differences, Ireland can forge a beneficial union with England. Establishing rigid historical periods, she distinguishes between Ireland’s past and its “improved” present, warning English and Irish readers alike of the danger of remaining attached to irrational, unnecessary, and anachronistic pasts. But contingencies, accidents, and anachronisms accumulate in her novels, disrupting both the historical periods that Edgeworth establishes and the future-

1 Maria Edgeworth, “Memory and Invention,” in *Practical Education* (1798; New York: Woodstock Books, 1996), 3:68.

2 This disjunction between Edgeworth’s educational and Irish writing is surprising given Mona Narain’s argument that “Edgeworth did not see her fiction as separate from her prose works, in fact, she often wrote fictional pieces as illustrations of her theories and her theories were based on real life stories.” Narain, “Not the Angel in the House: Intersections of the Public and Private in Maria Edgeworth’s *Moral Tales* and *Practical Education*,” in *New Essays on Maria Edgeworth* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 58. Brian Hollingworth has considered some of these contradictions of Edgeworth’s writing, arguing that, despite Edgeworth’s role in creating the regional novel, she desired to create novels that transcended their particular historical and cultural contexts. Hollingworth, *Maria Edgeworth’s Irish Writing: Language, History, Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 9.

oriented politics that they imply. Playing with what Clara Tuite calls “retroactivity”—an aestheticized form of history that reanimates the past—Edgeworth’s Irish novels fail to cultivate memory for “useful purposes,” showing instead that useless facts and irrational anachronisms can continue to have power within the present.³ Pasts create “improper” as well as “proper” associations, propel readers backward as well as forward, and emerge in particular rather than generalized contexts. Questioning the implicit imperialism of “reducing particulars to general principles,” anachronistic pasts emphasize the political value of discordance, contingency, and historical misuse to undercut imperial circuits of meaning within the novel. These pasts refuse the assumed futurity that useful history naturalizes, allowing history’s heterogeneity—the way it resists generalization and ordered chronologies—to imagine political possibilities that do not simply encourage either union with England or Irish nationalism.

Naturalizing a process of Irish improvement that would unify England and Ireland, Edgeworth’s useful history sought to deprive the past of its efficacy in the present. In late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Ireland, the past was so unstable and politicized that it frequently disrupted the present, revealing the illegitimacy of British rule and Anglo-Irish land ownership.⁴ To make history legitimate the contemporary Anglo-Irish order, Edgeworth not only had to emphasize the present, as Catherine Gallagher suggests, but also had to detach this present from the particular memories, details, and traditions of the native Irish past that continued to work within the present.⁵ Edgeworth sought to shape Ireland’s troubled, violent history into a useful past by employing rigid periodization, demarcating then and now, past

3 Clara Tuite, “Maria Edgeworth’s Déjà-Voodoo: Interior Decoration, Retroactivity, and Colonial Allegory in *The Absentee*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20, no. 3 (2008): 388–89, doi: 10.1353/ecf.0.0003.

4 As Kevin Whelan argues, “In England the past was a stabilizing, even a sedating, political presence. In Ireland an appeal to the past inevitably worried old wounds on which the scar tissue had never fully congealed.” Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760–1830* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 37.

5 Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 289. For more on the ways in which Edgeworth’s fiction complicates legitimacy grounded in history or the past, see Sara L. Maurer, “Disowning to Own: Maria Edgeworth and the Illegitimacy of National Ownership,” *Criticism* 44 no. 4 (2002): 363–88, doi: 10.1353/crt.2003.0021.

and present, to ensure that the past stayed past. The usefulness of such periodization was twofold: forgetting the painful past, her Irish readers would begin to imagine a future united with England, and her English readers would stop using outdated stereotypes against the Irish.⁶ Such utility is of course paradoxical: to make the past useful—to make it serve the future—Edgeworth ensures that the past is not used in the present. Similar to what Nicholas Dames calls nostalgia, Edgeworth's useful history cultivates a "secure, generalizable, willed, genial retrospect that disconnects present from past and that operates always with an eye toward the future."⁷ To be useful is to be orderly, safely consigned to a previous historical period in order to encourage improvement and development towards a future.

However, *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802) and *Castle Rackrent* (1800) exemplify the ways in which Edgeworth's attempts to use the past are constantly disrupted by anachronisms that unsettle the logic of her periodization and the forms of her history. These texts are overwhelmingly multiple and heterogeneous in part because they move towards both the past and the future. As Ian Duncan points out, improvement fiction located on the Celtic fringe generally moves in these opposing directions: while the forward-oriented improvement plot narrates the eradication of dirt, "the dirt that gets cleaned up is the stuff that gives the tale its savor, its humor, its distinctiveness—that constitutes, in opposition to its didactic program, its aesthetic enjoyment."⁸ Edgeworth's aesthetics—or the aspects of her writing that create its pleasure, humour, and distinctive style—work against her ostensible political purpose, to improve the Irish through the regulation of history and a future-oriented politics. In *Castle Rackrent*, these contradictions regularly occur at sites of metalepsis, or collisions between narrative levels. Collapsing the distance between the fictional editor and Thady Quirk, the illiterate Rackrent family steward who tells the story in his "vernacular idiom," these sites make the novel's opposing historical trajectories and discordant chronologies visible as they

6 As Tuite argues, "To attack and reuse the 'prejudice against Irish barbarism' was an ongoing campaign of Edgeworth's" (399).

7 Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10.

8 Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 71.

foster relationships that undermine established historical periods and political forms.⁹

In this article, I consider the anachronistic aesthetics at work in Edgeworth’s Irish writing, focusing especially on *Castle Rackrent* and *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, in order to argue that Edgeworth’s anachronisms establish lived relationships to the past that Edgeworth’s politics desire to eradicate. Seeking to use the past to hasten a union between England and Ireland, her Irish writing nevertheless reveals the aesthetic pleasures and political power of historical misuse. The Rackrents cannot learn from the past—failure and folly, whether in the courts of law, debt, or drunkenness, begets more failure and folly—and Thady Quirk is more comfortable revelling in the past that he never experienced, such as the drinking parties that display Sir Patrick’s notorious hospitality, than he is describing the present that he inhabits. Taking this aesthetic pleasure seriously counters what Graham Thompson calls the assumed “inevitability” of literary historical modes.¹⁰ For Thompson, historical periodization can be a paranoid practice, which seeks to guard against surprise by confirming that history had to happen the way it happened and that the future will follow from the present. Opening up the past so that it is not simply what happened but what could have happened, not just what we need to use in the present, but what expands our conception of the present, Edgeworth’s anachronistic aesthetics show that even texts that seek to create a progressive, useful history can unsettle assumptions about historical time. Mobilizing relationships between past and present, aesthetics and history, Unionist and anti-imperial politics, history in Edgeworth’s Irish writing exceeds the forms through which she attempts to organize it. In the process, her writing questions the impulse towards a useful history, showing that particulars—aesthetic experience, the contingencies of timing, the peculiarities of an Irish context—help imagine political possibilities that work against the assumed future that a useful history presupposes and literary history often secures.

9 Edgeworth, “*Castle Rackrent*” and “*Ennui*,” ed. Marilyn Butler (New York: Penguin, 1992), 62. References are to this edition.

10 Graham Thompson, “Periodizing the ’80s: ‘The Differential of History’ in Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 2 (2011): 306, doi: 10.1353/mfs.2011.0048.

Periodizing the Union, Placing Edgeworth

Hardly as popular as Edgeworth's educational writing or other novels in its own historical moment, *Castle Rackrent* is now considered a foundational text for Irish literary history precisely because it coincides with the beginning of a historical period—the Act of Union—and it consolidates the Irish nation.¹¹ In the words of Terry Eagleton, “Edgeworth’s fiction marks the place where a whole distinctive *object* known as Ireland makes its first fictional appearance, and does so precisely because it has become problematical.”¹² Despite scepticism about origin narratives, critics tend to agree with Eagleton’s claim in part because the two dominant forms of Irish literary history—the historical period and the nation—so neatly coincide and reinforce one another in this novel. While *Castle Rackrent*’s concept of history is difficult to delineate, the significance of its chronology is clear: the events of the story take place “before the year 1782,” the year Grattan’s Parliament established some independence in Irish affairs, while the publication coincides with the passage of the Act of Union in 1800. These significant dates cannot be arbitrary. As Brian Hollingworth argues, “To publish an Irish story in January 1800 was a political act.”¹³ Scholars return to *Castle Rackrent* for reasons beyond its humour, style, and pervasive irony; they return to this work because, despite the novel’s “startling incoherence,” it confirms the coherence of our forms of literary history.¹⁴

The problem of periodizing the Union is that it is reified by both Irish nationalist and British histories despite the lack of a historical consensus regarding its effects. Passed after the violent rebellion of 1798, the Union aimed to conciliate the Irish and protect the British from future political unrest. On the one hand,

11 Seamus Deane makes a version of this argument in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 32. Similarly, Robert Tracy argues that “inventing the Irish novel, she invented the colonial novel as well.” Tracy, *The Unappeasable Host: Studies in Irish Identities* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 17. Derek Hands suggests that *Castle Rackrent* is a foundational text because it “self-consciously establishes itself as something utterly new and original.” Hands, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61.

12 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (New York: Verso, 1995), 175.

13 Hollingworth, 73.

14 Deane, 39.

the Union legally assimilated Ireland into the United Kingdom and integrated the Irish into British imperial affairs. On the other hand, it ensured Ireland's continued political subordination to Britain, confirming through its acts and administration “that Ireland was British with a difference.”¹⁵ The Union was both an origin and an ending: from a nationalist perspective, it was the origin of illegitimate British rule and the end of republican hopes in Ireland, and, from a British perspective, it was the end of a long process of British state consolidation.¹⁶

The Union dominates Irish literary histories as a recurring trope, a novelistic structure, and a period designator. Literary histories customarily begin with the Union—more often than not with Edgeworth's writing.¹⁷ The centrality of the Union as a period break emerges in part from what Ina Ferris calls its awkwardness—that it created a union but not unity, incorporated the Irish into the British state without granting Catholic civic rights, and, perhaps most importantly, generated discursive energy.¹⁸ Its historical force is so compelling that even studies of Irish fiction before the Union read proleptically: they consider how this earlier fiction relates to “Union” fiction by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson.¹⁹ This approach to early Irish fiction seems to confirm that the Act of Union is the origin of Irish literature in English, certainly the origin of the Irish novel, even as they push the dates of this origin slightly earlier.

15 D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability*, rev. ed. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005), 35. For more on the imperial implications of the union, see Christine Kinealy, “At Home with the Empire: The Example of Ireland,” in *At Home in Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78.

16 Kevin Whelan, “The Other Within: Ireland, Britain and the Act of Union,” in *Acts of Union: The Causes, Contexts and Consequences of the Act of Union*, ed. Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 13.

17 As Jacqueline Belanger argues, “Many histories of the Irish novel begin with the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland and often concern themselves with the genre that seems to register the effects of the Union most dramatically: the national tale.” Belanger, introduction to *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Facts and Fiction*, ed. Jacqueline Belanger (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 26.

18 Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–5.

19 Ian Campbell Ross, “Irish Fiction before the Union,” in *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Facts and Fiction*, 38.

The Union has even greater force to shape Irish literary history because of the assumption that history and matters of “public interest” trump aesthetics in Irish literature.²⁰ As Sean Ryder suggests, “Unlike F. R. Leavis’s ‘great traditions’ of nineteenth-century fiction and poetry, which were canons ostensibly constructed on moral and aesthetic grounds, Irish literary historians have usually based their claims for the value of nineteenth-century texts on their historical or political importance.”²¹ History and politics not only affect what Irish literature people read; scholars also tend to understand Irish aesthetics as in the service of history and politics rather than as having a relationship to history and politics that clashes with the author’s beliefs or deviates from the cultural moment. Scholars such as Seamus Deane contend that Irish literature embraces “an aesthetics of the actual ... that remains immersed in the local, the folklorish—or, more importantly, refuses the theoretical.”²² Edgeworth, whose writing—even her regional writing—resists “the local, the folklorish” in favour of rational theories and more generalized lessons, consistently appears at odds with this literary tradition. Scholars understand her “as a ‘belated’ Enlightenment figure in a Romantic, nineteenth-century Ireland” or, equally problematically, as an Anglo-Irish writer who ultimately favoured England over Ireland.²³ While Edgeworth supported the Union after its passage and promoted Enlightenment rationality, her writing routinely unsettles the apparent coherence of these positions. Her support of the Union does not always oppose traditional Irish culture, and her embrace of Enlightenment rationality does not always advocate improvement at the cost of romance.

What would it mean to acknowledge that the “awkward space of the Union” does not simply apply to the time after the passage of the Act of Union, but also to the historical break it engenders? To see the aesthetics of Irish literature as more than products of history and politics, as sources of contingency? Ian Duncan and Daniel Hack have begun thinking in these terms, arguing in

20 Joep Leerssen, “‘Interesting to all the world’: Fiction, Interest, and the Public Sphere,” in *The Irish Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Facts and Fiction*, 56.

21 Sean Ryder, “Literature in English,” in *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: A Guide to Recent Research*, ed. Laurence M. Geary and Margaret Kelleher (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 122.

22 Deane, 19.

23 Cliona Ó Gallchoir, *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 2.

quite different ways that Union writing moves in multiple directions, disrupting stable historical chronologies and coherent political stances rather than straightforwardly resulting from or responding to them.²⁴ Building on their work, I suggest that Edgeworth’s Irish writing, *Castle Rackrent* in particular, expands conceptions of history by showing how aesthetics disrupt rigid historical periodization. Specifically, this writing reveals portable forms, such as literary language, that transcend historical context in *An Essay on Irish Bulls* and forms of metalepsis that propel readers forward and backward in time in *Castle Rackrent*. These portable forms foster relationships that unsettle the orderly structures of literary history. Like the political union between England and Ireland, the union between history and aesthetics is an uneasy one: its awkwardness can transform literary history by showing how novelistic time creates historical heterogeneity that refuses the inevitability of literary historical periods. Not simply responding to historical events or reinforcing historical periods, Edgeworth’s Irish writing depicts historical relationships that question the boundaries of seemingly inevitable historical forms.

“An Essay on Irish Bulls”: Ordering the Aesthetic

Written by Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Edgeworth, *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802) elucidates the awkward union between aesthetics and history by regulating anachronisms and anachronistic behaviour only to celebrate anachronistic aesthetics. Published two years after *Castle Rackrent*, *An Essay on Irish Bulls* considers the often ridiculed “Irish bull”—a confusion of ideas in speech typically associated with the Irish in the eighteenth century—in order to argue that the bull results from prejudice against the Irish rather than from anything inherently true about them.²⁵ Nineteenth-century reviews were mixed on this “rambling,

24 Daniel Hack, “Inter-Nationalism: *Castle Rackrent* and Anglo-Irish Union,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 29, no. 2 (1996): 147, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345856>. Ferris argues that Anglo-Irish novels write “around rather than within history, and it is precisely because of this position of not-quite-belonging that they estrange foundational narratives of history and genre” (15).

25 English periodicals commonly included Irish bulls as humorous material. See, for example, “Irish Bons Mots, alias Bulls,” *Town and Country Magazine, or Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment* (March 1784): 155; and “Epigram on Irish Bulls,” *Weekly Entertainer, or Agreeable and Instructive Repository* (24 November 1788): 504.

scrambling book.”²⁶ Some appreciated its “uninterrupted spirit of good humour,” while others felt that its overt attempts to reduce English prejudice towards the Irish destroyed all the humour of Hibernian speech.²⁷ Recent critics have reached more of a consensus, tending to praise the essay for its anti-imperialist politics. Mitzi Myers claims that it resists imperial “big” history by creating an inclusive historical collage, and Marilyn Butler argues that it bolsters the status of the Irish by functioning as “both a history and a map, locating the Irish of the day among their British and Atlantic neighbors.”²⁸

Like Butler and Myers, I contend that the political thrust of the essay lies in its representation of history. But history itself is not stable within the essay, for despite its hybridity and inclusiveness—the aspects of the essay that Butler and Myers indicate make it anti-imperial—history also functions through rigid periodization that encourage the very forms of progress that underwrite English imperialism. History is both a progressive chronology that distinguishes between useful and anachronistic pasts and an inclusive collage that inserts Hibernian speech in a timeless literary tradition. Like the memories cultivated for “useful purposes” in *Essays on Practical Education*, useful pasts travel—they help shape the present and encourage improvement in the future—while anachronistic pasts disrupt the drive towards improvement. For the Edgeworths, history as a chronology works the same way: it orients itself towards the present and distances itself from the facts and experience that constitute the past.

In *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, Irish antiquarianism functions as the primary signifier of a form of history that mistakenly treasures anachronistic pasts. When the Edgeworths abandon their irony and “joyfully speak in our own characters,” they declare their interest in the present, differentiating their study from the

26 Review of *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, by Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Edinburgh Review* (July 1803): 398.

27 Review of *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, by Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *Monthly Register, and Encyclopedian Magazine* (June 1802): 245.

28 Mitzi Myers, “Goring John Bull: Maria Edgeworth’s Hibernian High Jinks versus the Imperialist Imaginary,” in *Cutting Edges: Postmodern Critical Essays on Eighteenth-Century Satire*, ed. James E. Gill (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 367–94; and Marilyn Butler, “Edgeworth, the United Irishmen, and ‘More Intelligent Treason,’” in *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, ed. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 46.

accounts by Irish historians and antiquarians such as Sylvester O'Halloran.²⁹ They “candidly confess that we are more interested in the fate of the present race of its inhabitants” and indicate that “by this declaration we have no fear of giving offence to any but rusty antiquaries” (122). By calling the antiquaries “rusty” and suggesting that understanding the origins of Irish identity is “a matter of indifference to us,” the Edgeworths quite deliberately undermine the importance of the Irish past both as past and for the present and future (122).³⁰ As I have already indicated, the debates between Irish antiquarian societies often had more to do with the present than the past—while Anglo-Irish patriots celebrated Irish antiquity as a highly civilized time, other antiquarians contended that Ireland's origins confirmed Irish barbarity in the present.³¹ The Edgeworths, however, defuse these debates by insisting that the past which antiquarians argue about has no influence in the present. They even represent the party passions associated with the 1798 Rebellion—passions that still caused contention between England and Ireland in 1802—as “rusty” Irish antiquarianism: “It is to be hoped, that all party barbarism in language will now be disused and forgotten” (20). Representing both distant and relatively recent pasts as “useless,” the Edgeworths insist that only pasts that serve the interest of the Act of Union are useful.

The essay condemns Irish antiquarianism, which is an easy target for English readers, in part to chastise the English for their own anachronistic and antiquarian behaviours: treating the Irish in the same way before and after the passage of the Act of the Union and maintaining an outdated image of the Irish.³² The English are

29 Edgeworth, *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, ed. Jane Desmarais and Marilyn Butler (1802; Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), 120. References are to this edition. Sylvester O'Halloran was a nationalist antiquarian whose studies of Gaelic Ireland fuelled and provided material for cultural nationalists. Lady Morgan included references to O'Halloran and other Irish antiquarians in her novels. For a more extended discussion, see Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 61.

30 Within the essay, however, the Edgeworths suggest that the Irish have already distanced themselves from their “ancient foibles” and were able to laugh at their caricature in *Castle Rackrent* (*An Essay on Irish Bulls*, 120).

31 Leerssen, 73.

32 Helen O'Connell points out that the essay demonstrates “Irish speech can, it seems, exhibit all the civility of a modernizing and progressive Englishness as well as a dreaded Gaelic backwardness.” O'Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 50.

just as guilty as the antiquarians of treasuring useless facts about the past, for they, like the antiquarians, fail to recognize how the Union fundamentally changes England and Ireland's relationship in the present and thus affects which pasts are useful. Because the Union unites the nations into one "imperial head," the Edgeworths contend that the ridicule of the Irish invites the ridicule of the English. In their words, "Whatever might have been the policy of the English nation towards Ireland whilst she was a separate kingdom, since the union it can no longer be her wish to depreciate the talents or ridicule the language of Hibernians" (123). The new political union between England and Ireland requires an active forgetting of their past differences and political separation.

But timely behaviour also requires the passive acceptance of change and improvement. "The Bath Coach Conversation" describes an Englishman whose first-hand experience of Ireland confirms that the written representations of the Irish as wild, violent, and drunk are "tales of other times" (84).³³ This phrase, repeated from *Castle Rackrent*, does not question whether stereotypes of the Irish were at one time accurate; rather, it merely contends that the passage of time has rendered them obsolete. A Scotchman agrees with the Englishman, claiming that "illiberal notions die away of themselves" and implying that the passage of time nearly always brings change (83). The Irishman in the story has the hardest time accepting the new, improved image of Ireland, not because he believes in the outdated stereotypes, but because he desires to temper the Englishman's enthusiasm for Ireland. His reluctance reassures the reader that the Irish are capable of viewing themselves from a critical perspective. Timeliness dictates that all Englishmen, like the Englishman in the story, should accept "a more just and enlarged idea of the Irish than has been generally entertained" (123).³⁴

33 The Edgeworths may have had to repeat this phrase because so many of readers of *Castle Rackrent* mistakenly understood it as an up-to-date representation of Ireland. As one reviewer of *An Essay on Irish Bulls* suggests, perhaps the essay is "a kind of peace-offering to the Irish nation, for the harmless satire conveyed in the little novel." Review of *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, by Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, *British Critic* (September 1802): 332.

34 Hollingworth indicates that "this same implication—that traditional English views of the Irish are out-dated and based on ignorance—is central to Edgeworth's narrative approach in the later Irish stories also. In the *Essay*, and elsewhere, her writing is clearly intended to furnish the English with the 'truth' about Ireland, and to justify the ways of Ireland to its new and powerful partner in Union" (51).

The Edgeworths reinforce the importance of distinguishing between past and present by insisting that speech which confuses past and present is incorrect. In an essay dedicated to reclaiming Hibernian speech as "proper," they maintain that an "anachronism of ideas," or a confusion of chronology in speech, is a gross "blunder" (40). Telling the anecdote of "the Irishman who begged a friend to look over his library, to find for him the history of the world before the creation," they challenge the extent to which the temporal mistake signifies "Irishness" without challenging its status as a blunder (40). Like many of the other bulls included in the essay, this temporal confusion has its precedents: a British finger-post that urges readers to see "these roads before they were made" and a rabbi who asserts that Providence asked Adam about creation before he was born (40). Insisting that chronology should govern speech, they maintain that both the Irishman's and the rabbi's use of the word "before" is a mistake.

Even bulls that the Edgeworths do not specifically characterize as anachronisms involve temporal confusion. They introduce the statement, "I hate that woman for she changed me at nurse" as a bull about identity by prefacing it with the statement: "Lord Orford particularly admires this bull, because in the confusion of the blunderer's ideas he is not clear even of his personal identity" (10). Yet, they interpret the bull to be about the difficulty of maintaining continuity over time. Lord Orford mistakenly assumes that there is stability between a person's past and present identity, but, as the Edgeworths suggest, "we may presume that our Hibernian's consciousness could not retrograde to the time when he was changed at nurse; consequently there was no continuity between the infant and the man who expressed his hatred of the nurse for perpetrating the fraud" (11). By emphasizing the discontinuity "between the infant and the man," the Edgeworths reinforce the discontinuity between past and present in speech that they insist upon in history elsewhere in the essay.

Although the essay carefully regulates English and Irish behaviour by pointing to anachronistic practices and representations, it also legitimates supposedly "Irish" bulls by contending that they evoke a portable aesthetic experience. What makes Irish bulls laughable to others is that they seem to express the particularities and peculiarities of Irish national character. The Irishman in the "Bath Coach Conversation" describes the seeming tendency of the Irish to make bulls as "little peculiarities in my countrymen" (84).

For the Edgeworths, these “little peculiarities” show the power of literary language when detached from any notion of “Irishness.” Describing an Irish idiom that must be translated to be understood by English readers, the Edgeworths declare, “this is the perfection of the art. Let the genius of French exaggeration and of eastern hyperbole hide their heads—Virgil is scarcely more sublime” (55). If the Edgeworths are practicing their own form of exaggeration here, the allusion to works by Longinus, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Voltaire, among others, throughout the essay indicates that the Edgeworths are attempting to make a serious connection between bulls and “certain figures of rhetoric” (53). When bulls are examples of poetic language as opposed to comic blunders, they have a value that transcends the specificities of the speaker. To misread a bull as historical (conveying facts about Irish culture and character) rather than literary (making use of the same rhetorical devices as “common literature”) is to display “well-meaning ignorance” (54).

In this particular text, then, the notion of the transcendent, portable aesthetic, which had lost favour in recent years, actually challenges a more dangerous form of timelessness: the static stereotypes of Irish identity as “peculiar” and “backward.” Wai Chee Dimock, who reclaims the aesthetic from such criticism, argues that a resistance to the nation-state and its ordering of history inheres in the very concept of the aesthetic: “The long backward extension of the aesthetic invokes a map that predates the nation-state, one that allows for multilateral ties, more complex and far-flung than those dictated by territorial jurisdictions.”³⁵ These multilateral ties are at work in *An Essay on Irish Bulls* when the poor Dublin shoeblack evokes Virgil and an Irish cottager channels *The Iliad*. By representing Irish idiom as a medium for aesthetic experience, the Edgeworths make Irish language seem worldly rather than provincial, poetic rather than peculiar.

I contrast the Edgeworths’ structured history and evocation of the aesthetic not to identify these two as mutually exclusive practices, but rather to highlight how both utility and aesthetics have political efficacy in *An Essay on Irish Bulls*. While anachronism challenges stereotypes of the Irish by showing how representations should be subject to historical change, the

35 Wai Chee Dimock, “Aesthetics at the Limits of the Nation: Kant, Pound, and the *Saturday Review*,” *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (2004): 526, doi: 10.1215/00029831-76-3-525.

association of bulls with literary language argues that what seems to be peculiar or particular to the Irish actually evokes a transcendent aesthetic. This amusing collection of anecdotes raises a serious theoretical question: if one organizes representations into discrete historical periods, how does one also account for experiences—such as aesthetic experience—that transcend these groupings? The essay does not resolve this question; instead, it uses the dual, and sometimes conflicting, authority of history and the aesthetic to encourage a more just understanding of the Irish. Tellingly, though, the essay implies that literary language resists placement within a rational historical framework and introduces the very heterogeneity that the Edgeworths desire to organize in the name of utility. Such heterogeneity emphasizes mobile, transhistorical relationships that put pressure on the coherence of the essay's political and historical forms.

"Castle Rackrent," Metalepsis, and Anachronistic Past

The question of how to relate utility and aesthetics is more complicated in *Castle Rackrent* because utility and aesthetics not only imply different understandings of history, but also point to different political ends. The narrative moves between the fictional editor, who provides a preface, footnotes, and glossary for the written tale, and the narrator, Thady Quirk, the illiterate Rackrent family steward, who tells the story of the family's adventures and eventual demise in his "vernacular idiom" (62). Although this idiom, rife with bulls and blunders, creates narrative energy, the editor does not legitimate it as literary. Instead, he indicates that Thady's story is valuable precisely because Thady lacks "literary talents," arguing that it is an authentic account that will help English readers learn about Ireland (62). For the editor, the story is historical, enabling clear distinctions between past and present, while helping to imagine a shared future between England and Ireland. For Thady, the story is of the present, revealing the continued efficacy of the traditional Irish past, local histories, and cultural beliefs.³⁶ Given these differences, when scholars favour

36 See Michael Gamer, who writes that Thady's tale "is striking for its *lack* of historical sensibility and for the noticeable contrast it makes to the acute historicity of the editor's preface, notes, and glossary." Gamer, "Maria Edgeworth and the Romance of Real Life," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 2 (2001): 246, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1346217>.

the editor's framework, they tend to see the novel as shoring up Anglo-Irish or English interests in Ireland, and when they favour Thady's story, they tend to see it as giving voice to the colonized Irish.³⁷ Daniel Hack's interpretation of *Castle Rackrent* helpfully suggests that Union writing distinguishes itself not through coherent politics (a coherent stance on the Union, or an established political position), but through its contradictory aesthetics and politics. Arguing that the novel adopts a logic of supplementarity where what seems to be a belated addition—the Union—"turns out to be logically prior to or constitutive of that which it is supposed to add or to complete," Hack maintains that the novel's politics results from its incongruities rather than from the resolution of these incongruities.³⁸

In what follows, I consider how the novel moves between anachronism as an error and anachronism as an aesthetic, disrupting the coherence of the editor's historical periodization and destabilizing the politics of historical use, without necessarily leading to the acceptance of Thady's contingent, local history. I conclude that instead of endorsing a coherent political position, the novel's multiplicity reveals the layers of politics at work in both historical and aesthetic forms. Revealing the problems with "useful history," the novel shows that defining utility in terms of forward-oriented development or generalized lessons obscures anachronistic pasts that establish a more capacious and contingent understanding of the present moment. Like the aesthetics of *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, these anachronistic pasts foster relationships that work across territories and political forms, undercutting imperial circuits of meaning by resisting the novel's tendency to generalize and undermining Irish nationalism by showing how Ireland and Irishness emerge in relation to Englishness.

Metalepsis, or the collision of otherwise distinct narrative levels, grounds my account. Within *Castle Rackrent*, metalepsis is a site of conflict because it occurs when the fictional editor and Thady disagree about the aesthetic and historical mode, the representational logic, and sometimes even the "facts" of the

37 For an overview of the contradictory interpretations of *Castle Rackrent*, see Katherine O'Donnell, "Castle Stopgap: Historical Reality, Literary Realism, and Oral Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 22, no. 1 (2009): 116–17, doi: 10.1353/ecf.0.0109.

38 Hack, 147.

story.³⁹ Prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, metalepsis interpolates the reader into the world of the novel by transgressing the boundaries between the story (the plot) and the discourse (the narration of the plot), as well as between the narrator and the reader through direct addresses from the narrator, situated within the world of the novel, to the reader, situated in the "real" world. For example, the lively intrusions of the *Tom Jones* narrator heighten the humour of the story by creating shared jokes between the narrator and reader. Speaking directly to the reader from the story, the narrator warns: "Reader, take care, I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr. Allworthy's, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e'ven venture to slide down together, for Miss Bridget rings her bell."⁴⁰ These interruptions, which sometimes take the form of footnotes, punctuate the plotted actions with conversations that draw the reader into the world of the novel, in part by managing the reader's ironic distance from this world. Moving rapidly between distinct narrative levels, metalepsis reveals "that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to the same narrative."⁴¹

Metalepsis reminds us that the novel, as a genre, merges history and fiction, truth and lies by moving between narrative and diegetic levels in ways that collapse the distance between reality and representation. If such a merger of the extradiegetic and diegetic can be troubling and transgressive—postmodern fiction famously uses metalepsis to disrupt grand narratives—it also helps the novel achieve political and didactic ends. In many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, metalepsis unifies the world of the novel by bringing readers, narrators, and characters to the same narrative space in order to insist that the events and experiences contained within the fictional story can also (and often should also) instruct "real" life.⁴² As Patrick Brantlinger points out, direct addresses to nineteenth-century readers worked

39 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 236.

40 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (London: Penguin, 1985), 31.

41 Genette, 236.

42 For more on the ways in which metalepsis often "enhances the realistic illusion," see Monika Fludernik, "Scene Shift, Metalepsis, and the Metaleptic Mode" *Style* 37, no. 4 (2003): 392, Gale Document Number: GALE|A123581243.

to assure them that novels and novel reading were respectable as opposed to dangerous or frivolous.⁴³ In turn, Catherine Gallagher's and Thomas Koenigs's recent works on fictionality point out that bringing the reader into the world of the novel makes the novel "useful." Gallagher argues that the rise of fictionality depends upon a shift from referentiality to plausibility that enables generalization. Drawing on Fielding, she argues that the novel "can refer to a whole class of people in general (as well as in private) because its proper names do not refer to persons in particular."⁴⁴ In the language of Edgeworth's *Essays on Practical Education*, the novel's generalizing work ensures that readers are "not obliged to treasure up heterogeneous facts."⁴⁵ Building on Gallagher's scholarship, Koenigs contends that fiction brings readers into the action of the story in ways that transform the act of reading into a mode of acquiring experience.⁴⁶ Metalepsis enables generalizations and creates experience by moving between narrative levels to de-emphasize particulars—specific referents, settings, characters, or readers—and foster unity. Instead of emphasizing facts, metalepsis emphasizes a relationship between facts and fiction that enables action, whether identification, judgment, or improvement.

But, if the novel genre aims to merge fact and fiction to create a "useful" history, then, in an Irish or colonial setting, metalepsis questions the normative structures through which we apprehend history by disrupting rather than unifying the world of the novel. Elaine Freedgood's account of metalepsis is helpful, showing how the colonial novel *Canadian Crusoes* makes visible the circuits of meaning that are powerful yet invisible in more canonical metropolitan novels. Like *Castle Rackrent*, *Canadian Crusoes* explains a relatively unknown and misunderstood land to readers in the metropolitan centre through a gripping story with lengthy

43 Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1998), 13.

44 Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1:342.

45 Gallagher turns to Edgeworth as an example of an author who participated in anti-fiction discourse—condemning novels for emphasizing particulars and exciting emotions—but still attempted to write "productive" fiction (*Nobody's Story*, 257–328).

46 Thomas Koenigs, "'Whatever May be the Merit of my Book as a Fiction': *Wieland's* Instructional Fictionality," *ELH* 79, no. 3 (2012): 733, doi: 10.1353/elh.2012.0027.

footnotes.⁴⁷ Suggesting that metalepsis is “misplaced” in a colonial setting, Freedgood argues that the footnotes “estrangle the ordinary relationship between fictionality and factuality that we usually glide by in the novel” and, in doing so, reveal how novels set in both the colony and the metropole teach readers to colonize space “first in fantasy, but possibly later in fact.”⁴⁸ In these colonial novels, metalepsis becomes a site where particulars question established generalizations and disrupt the lessons of experience. The failure to create seamless circuits of meaning—by Edgeworth and other colonial writers—productively reveals what more successful forms of metalepsis obscure. In this sense, the Irish novel’s clunky interruptions, digressions, and uneasy relationship between fact and fiction, exemplified by *Castle Rackrent*, create forms of metalepsis that are estranging.

Edgeworth’s contradictory desires to instruct English readers through her writing about Ireland, on the one hand, and to encourage English readers to experience Ireland for themselves, on the other hand, become visible at sites of metalepsis.⁴⁹ The intrusion of referents into Edgeworth’s stories—“real” objects, texts, people—insists that Ireland requires a different mode of generalization precisely because representations overly mediate metropolitan readers’ experience of Ireland. In *The Absentee* (1812), Sir James Brooke welcomes Lord Colambre to Ireland by instructing him on “different representations and misrepresentations of Ireland ... and with discriminative, not superficial celerity, touched on all ancient and modern authors on this subject, from Spenser and Davies to Young and Beaufort.”⁵⁰ The inclusion of “real” authors in this fictional text teaches the English reader about the history of English policy towards Ireland and the antecedents for Edgeworth’s novels. In doing so, Edgeworth also subtly notes the difference between representation and reality. For, if these texts instruct the reader, they also contain “misrepresentations.” The proper way to learn about Ireland seems to be by experiencing it not through representation

47 These stories are gripping in quite different ways. While *Castle Rackrent* is a humorous tale, *Canadian Crusoes* is a story of adventure and survival.

48 Elaine Freedgood, “Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 402, doi: 10.1353/nlh.2010.0009.

49 See also Ó Gallchoir, who argues that the novel expresses scepticism about whether readers can distinguish between truth and falsity (69).

50 Edgeworth, *The Absentee* (1812; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 81. References are to this edition.

(fictional or otherwise) but rather in reality. Even learning from direct experience is difficult. As Sir James warns Lord Colambre, Ireland's particularities and prevalent misrepresentations make it difficult to generalize from experience: "In Dublin there is positively good company, and positively bad; but not, as in London, many degrees of comparison" (82). Without questioning whether one's particular experience represents the whole or recognizing the specifics of Dublin society, one might further misrepresent Ireland. Disrupting the novel's normative circuits of meaning, the intrusion of the real in *The Absentee* reminds readers of the dangers of generalizing with too little experience.

In *Castle Rackrent*, metalepsis is similarly disruptive, although formally it works quite differently. First, it is far more pervasive, occurring through the intrusion of the real into the story as well as through the editor's footnotes and glossary that constantly interrupt the story. Second, these intrusions create collisions between two distinct forms of authority—Thady's authenticity and the editor's academic citation—making the two narrative levels work against one another. For, if Thady describes local, particular events and experiences that would be unfamiliar to the metropolitan reader, the editor's references translate them for an English audience in ways that defamiliarize what is particular and what is shared knowledge. Unlike in *The Absentee*, where Edgeworth questions Lord Colambre's and, by extension, the reader's experience of Ireland in order to reinforce the authority of Sir James Brooke, in *Castle Rackrent* Edgeworth destabilizes the reader's experience while also refusing to legitimate either Thady or the editor's authority. Take, for instance, the seemingly commonplace beginning to Thady's story of "Monday morning." Although it seems to be an innocuous temporal marker—the reader can only assume that Thady narrates the story on "Monday morning"—metalepsis destabilizes the very meaning of "Monday." Explaining that Monday morning has cultural rather than temporal significance, the editor writes in the accompanying glossary: "Thady begins his memoirs of the Rackrent Family by dating *Monday morning*, because no great undertaking can be auspiciously commenced in Ireland on any morning but *Monday morning* ... All the intermediate days, between making such speeches and the ensuing Monday, are wasted" (123). The seemingly familiar "Monday" becomes strange as Edgeworth refuses to legitimate either perspective.

History and historical time are at stake in these conflicts because, as the novel moves between Thady and the editor, it also moves between anachronistic aesthetics and errors in ways that resist historical generalization by revealing the contingency of timing. Often working against a useful history, time reveals the force of improper associations that undercut the drive towards an assumed future. Like *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, the editor attempts to create a useful history by periodizing. Intruding into the story to authorize Thady's account, the editor mobilizes anachronism as an error to relegate Thady to an outdated past. Thady's story resists placement in the editor's historical framework by disrupting its terms and unsettling its generalizations. Drawing on what *An Essay on Irish Bulls* calls "anachronisms of ideas," Thady's story confuses temporality to show that historical time is not linear or progressive. Thus, like the dirt that Ian Duncan suggests propels improvement fiction in two directions—the didactic narrative of the eradication of dirt and the aesthetic pleasure of dirt—time itself has two functions in *Castle Rackrent*. It periodizes so that the novel can be useful, and it also disrupts these periods by showing the pleasurable play of contingencies, reanimated pasts, and anachronisms of ideas. Instead of unifying the world of the novel and the world of the reader or integrating historical and novelistic time, these sites of metalepsis introduce questions about whether historical time is too generalized, obscuring the facts, details, and chaotic temporalities of historical events.

In the preface, the editor directly addresses "the ignorant English reader" to contextualize and periodize the story in order to foster understanding between England and Ireland. Including two dates, 1782 and 1800, the editor marks the division between the time of Thady's story (some time before 1782) and the time that the story circulates (1800). This division actively detaches the Ireland that the novel represents from the Ireland of the present. The editor explains: "The editor hopes his readers will observe that these are 'tales of other times': that the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age" (63). The novelistic language, "tales of other times," contends that readers do not need a more specific historical context to understand Thady's story; they simply need to understand that it is "other" to 1800. As Michael Gamer points out, 1782 "announces the place where Irish lore ends and Irish history begins" without necessarily providing historical specificity—Thady's story "could take place at any time before that

date.”⁵¹ According to the subtitle, “an Hibernian Tale taken from facts and from the manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782,” the novel presents a story about Ireland’s past rather than its present in part to create a shared future between Ireland and England. Thus, as Jacqueline Belanger argues, the editor intervenes in the story to warn readers “that using even her own fiction as a reliable source of facts about Ireland may handicap British readers and travelers in their endeavors to see the ‘real’ Ireland.”⁵²

The “real” Ireland that Edgeworth legitimates through the editor’s framework is an improved Ireland where Irish individuals—and English readers—can mock the irrational practices of Ireland’s past. Moving seamlessly between “nations” and “individuals,” the editor attempts to unify the English readers whom he addresses with the Irish individuals that the story represents by declaring, “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 its ancestors” (63). Such a statement solidifies the stance of a unified “present generation” in order to encourage readers to laugh at Thady as a harmless anachronism, detached from the national history (and identity) suggested through the story. In doing so, the editor puts the story to use, showing that “real” Ireland has detached itself from its anachronistic past and become more like England.

By periodizing, the editor works to generalize, showing that the specific details, idioms, and events of Thady’s story confirm the editor’s historical framework. For example, the editor’s footnotes imply that Thady’s story is not only a tale of other times, but also a tale told by other times. The notes inform readers that “childer” “is the manner in which many of Thady’s rank, and others in Ireland *formerly* pronounced the word *children*” (72). The language and pronunciation changed, and many of the social positions and practices to which the language refers no longer exist. Marking the demise of the class that exploited tenants and enabled landlords to ignore their responsibilities, the editor speaks of “middle men” entirely in the past tense: “There was

51 Gamer, 246.

52 Belanger, “Le vrai n’et pas toujours vraisemblable: The Evaluation of Realism in Edgeworth’s Irish Tales,” in *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*, ed. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 109.

a class of men termed middle men in Ireland" (73). The notes indicate that the word "gossoon" also denotes a class position that no longer exists, a slave to the cook and the butler that "used" to be in Irish families (94). Orality is also relegated to the past by the editor, who explains, "it *was* the custom in Ireland for those who could not write to make a cross to stand for their signature, as was formerly the practice of our English monarchs" (89). As the footnote continues on to include a facsimile of Judy's mark, the editor implies that the interest of this scene, and the illiteracy that it alludes to, is only for antiquaries (89).

The editor's history is dubious—middlemen and illiteracy persisted not only in Ireland but also in Edgeworth's fiction. Twelve years later, *The Absentee* takes up both issues, even repeating much of Thady's supposedly anachronistic vocabulary. Set after the Act of Union, this novel nonetheless uses Thady's idioms to recount how Lord Colambre's Irish host "had sent off a *gossoon* by the *first light* to Clonbrony, for an ounce of tea, a *quarter of sugar*, and a loaf of white bread" (*The Absentee*, 146–47). Because landlords live abroad in England and "commit power to bad hands and bad hearts," middlemen also continue in this representation of post-Union Ireland. Mr Nicholas Garraghty—the "perfect picture of an insolent, petty tyrant"—perpetuates the worst abuses of his class until Lord Colambre returns to his father's estate and sets things right (*The Absentee*, 166). If the native Irish are more literate in this novel, Edgeworth still subtly mocks the way that orality seeps into their writing. Larry Brady's letter to his brother reveals traces of Hibernian speech through frequent misspellings—"ould" for old, "rason" for reason and "mane" for mean (252). Edgeworth's later novels contradict the editor's footnotes in part because they, like the editor of *Castle Rackrent*, work to shape a useful history and yet continue to draw on the aesthetics of Thady's oral style. In doing so, they disrupt the editor's periodization within *Castle Rackrent* by showing that his use of the past tense is proleptic—tied to an imagined future rather than the present.

The aesthetics that continue throughout Edgeworth's Irish fiction are aesthetics of anachronism. They question the very premise of progressive history—the assumption that time brings change—introducing the pleasure of historical misuse through prevalent anachronisms of ideas. In doing so, they destabilize the editor's shaping and framing of the story through metalepsis, showing the details and particularities that bely the drive towards

generalization and at the same time imagine alternative political possibilities. Asserting a resistance to change on the sentence level, Thady refuses to allow the passage of time to change his verb tense, adverbs, or prepositions. Introducing “*the family*,” which is actually two families, he declares that “the family of the Rackrents is, I am proud to say, one of the most ancient in the kingdom. Everybody knows this is not the old family name, which was O’Shaughlin, related to the kings of Ireland” (66). Thady commits another anachronism of ideas, albeit on a smaller scale, when he introduces himself, again emphasizing continuity at the cost of accuracy. He says, “I have always been known by no other than ‘*honest Thady*,’—afterwards, in the time of Sir Murtagh, deceased, I remember to hear them calling me ‘*old Thady*,’ and now I’m come to ‘poor Thady” (65). The anachronism in this speech results from the conflict between the “always,” which indicates constancy, and the “afterwards” and the “now,” which suggest change and imply that the Rackrents no longer deem Thady “honest.” Although the family does not seem to continue to call him “honest Thady” at the time in which Thady tells his story, he employs the “always” in order to portray his own constancy, arguing that “as I have lived so I will die, true and loyal to the family” (66). Breaks, ruptures, and detachment from the past become more difficult as Thady shows how identity often resists change and improvement.

In Thady’s story, time works less as a historical framework than as a site of contingency. Drawing attention to the curiousness of timing rather than the power of official, historical time, Thady’s story demonstrates how easy it is to misuse the past. Functioning as an agent of the untimely, Thady fosters premature enthusiasm for the Rackrent family’s past in the members of the Rackrent family.⁵³ Thady fills the young Sir Condry’s head with dreams of inheritance by perching him on his knee to tell him stories about how he may inherit the estate one day. Such stories are untimely in two ways: Condry is too young to hear these stories, and the estate is too old and too encumbered from years of Rackrent family debt to be able to carry the same meaning as it did in the past. Inspired by Thady’s stories, Sir Condry “neglected to apply to the law as much as was expected of him; and secretly many of the tenants, and others, advanced him cash upon his note of hand value received,

53 Edgeworth warns against such influence in “Servants,” in *Practical Education*, 1:184.

promising bargain of leases and lawful interest, should he ever come into the estate” (86). Only when Sir Condy inherits the estate does he recognize his “embarrassed situation” and realize that the Castle Rackrent from Thady’s stories is hardly the Castle Rackrent that he inherits (86). Even this recognition does not stop him from seeking to recreate the past, for he builds a monument to Sir Patrick Rackrent with the inscription, “Sir Patrick Rackrent lived and died a monument of old Irish hospitality” (84). An anachronism of ideas that could appear in *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, the inscription shows how the untimely disrupts historical periods and simultaneously confuses reality and representation: Sir Patrick may have been “a monument” of Irish hospitality while alive, but he only became a material monument once he passed away.

If the editor’s framework works to represent Thady and his story as anachronistic—useful insofar as they stay in the past—Thady’s story seeks to make the narrator’s metaleptic interventions part of the pleasure of seeing the contingencies of timing. Thady often provides two possible explanations for events: one that fosters what Rita Felski calls “aesthetic enchantment” by drawing readers further into the story and another that manages ironic distance in order to give readers the pleasure of discovering hidden truth.⁵⁴ Thady’s description of Sir Murtagh’s death exemplifies this dichotomous narrative style: “He dug up a fairy-mount against my advice, and had no luck afterwards. Though a learned man in the law, he was a little too incredulous in other matters. I warned him that I heard the very Banshee that my grandfather heard under Sir Patrick’s window a few days before his death. But Sir Murtagh thought nothing of the Banshee, nor of his cough with a spitting of blood, brought on, I understand, by catching cold in attending the courts, and overstraining his chest with making himself heard in one of his favorite causes” (71). Thady’s account does not choose between the two possible explanations—that Sir Murtagh died of consumption or because he dug up a fairy-mount—but rather has them coexist as equally plausible if slightly contradictory. The editor seeks to historicize and translate Thady’s account through footnotes and a glossary entry that explains that “fairy-mounts” are simply “ant-hills” (71) that “*some years ago*, the common people believed ... were inhabited by fairies, or, as they called them, by the *good people*” (129). If the editor does so to suggest that the fairy-mounts

54 Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 53.

are an outdated, irrational belief, his interventions become complicit in the pleasures of Thady's story that validates them as possible explanations. Instead of countering the doubleness of Thady's history, the editor enhances it by showing how the "real foundation for the stories" can legitimate the belief in the power of the fairy-mounts even as it ostensibly tries to show that such belief is irrational (131). In the words of Katherine O'Donnell, "the multifaceted editorial edifice of title page, preface, footnotes, closing advertisement, and the long, fractured commentary of the glossary, accentuates the sublime achievement of the power of Thady's articulation to grip our imagination and dazzle our senses."⁵⁵ In this way, the editor's frequent use of past tense—italicized for emphasis—cannot relegate the pleasure or power of such stories to the past.

The metaleptic contradictions show that history within the novel refuses rigid distinctions between before and after, particular and general, disrupting a useful history that emphasizes progress towards an improved future. Metalepsis establishes circuits of meaning—"Monday morning" appears to be a temporal marker, then becomes a cultural signifier; "gossoon" seems to be an anachronistic error, then becomes an anachronistic aesthetic; and "fairy-mount" is ironized only to retain its ability to explain events and the Irish landscape—but these circuits do not serve a specific ideological "use." Instead of consolidating imperial history by connecting facts, events, and details to their "proper associations," the novel mobilizes improper associations that reveal that such work often prematurely periodizes history by cutting off connections to the past that retain power, efficacy, and pleasure in the present. In doing so, the novel not only undermines the literary form and social functions of realism, as Katherine O'Donnell argues, but it also questions the conventions of novelistic history by showing how anachronisms create a heterogeneous historical time that cuts across periods, disrupts shared national time, and creates discordance and contradiction rather than union. Such a historical time emphasizes the political possibilities of relationality that unsettle the primacy of forms. Relationships between individuals and nations, Ireland and England, Thady and the editors refuse the inevitability of the historical period, the nation, the Union. In the process, they question the assumed futurity of a useful history,

55 O'Donnell, 123–24.

demonstrating that the past—Thady and his story—continues to have efficacy to shape new futures. Thus, the novel’s ambivalent ending, which questions whether the Union will improve Ireland, maintains a commitment to improvement while doubting whether any particular political form—any assumed future—will guarantee such improvement.

Thady’s story represents a past that travels much like the literary aesthetic in *An Essay on Irish Bulls*: it violates the boundaries of historical periods and the geographic borders of the nation in order to insist on the continued influence of beliefs, practices, and customs from the past. Thady and his story are dated, and yet “the plain round tale of faithful Thady” (121) circulates beyond its historical moment, reanimating Sir Patrick and Sir Condy as it shows the continued power of a supposedly anachronistic past. The politics that result are mixed and contradictory—they do not advance the cause of Irish nationalism or British imperialism—and yet, precisely because they show the contingencies of historical timing, the particularities of historical events, and the pleasure of seeing history double, they push readers to examine the familiar structures through which they apprehend history. For our literary histories, such an emphasis on contingencies and particularities can enable new chronologies and forms of periodization wherein historical events, such as the Act of Union, do not simply imply historical ruptures or easily consolidate political forms such as the nation or the Union. The uneasy union of aesthetics and history in Edgeworth’s Irish writing reveals that anachronism can expand our understanding of the present and, by doing so, can help us imagine more discordant and heterogeneous relationships to the past and more open understandings of futurity.

