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FICTION POETICS AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPE: LOCAL COLOUR IN SCOTT, MORGAN, AND MATURIN

In 1824 Sir Walter Scott contributed an essay on 'Romance' to the fifth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in which he made a generic/typological distinction between the two popular forms of prose fiction: the romance and the novel. Scott pointed out that romance (with its roots reaching back to the chivalric tales of the Middle Ages) relied on colourful incident to the point of disregarding the dictates of plausibility. Following Dr Johnson's Dictionary, he defined the romance in terms of its 'wild adventure'. Plot consistency and realistic recognition value are secondary considerations in the genre of the romance; in contrast, the novel deals with the more ordinary course of human events: it is more sedate in the incidents it relates, will describe tea parties rather than dungeons, dragons, or damsels in distress, will represent a world which lies closer to the reader's own experience. In Scott's own words:

We would be rather inclined to describe a *Romance* as 'a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents'; being thus opposed to the kindred form of the *Novel*, which ... we would rather define as 'a fictitious narrative, differing from the romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society'.¹

The difference between novel and romance, then, lies in the notion of *vraisemblance*: unlike romantic fiction, the novel is read under the proviso of its plausibility, its being true to life: more precisely, true to 'life as we know it', true to the conventionally established mode of representing life.

But this generic border also, unavoidably, creates borderline cases; indeed, some remarkable instances in Scott's own prose fiction testify to that effect.² What is more, the distinction romance/novel draws a conceptual divide across then existing fictional practice, for although most contemporary prose fiction fits effortlessly into either of the two categories, in Ireland there was a school of writing which appears uncomfortably hybrid if viewed against the background of this genre distinction. It is this borderline class of Irish tales which I want to assess in the following pages; I draw on *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), *O'Donnel* (1814), and *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1824) by Lady Morgan, and *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) and *The Milesian Chief* (1812) by Charles Robert Maturin.³

As publishing dates already indicate, Morgan and Maturin undertook their Irish fiction well before Scott's own Waverley Novels, which they anticipate in some

¹ 'Essay on Romance', quoted from Scott's *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (London, n.d.), pp. 226-69 (p. 226).

² The Waverley Novels as a whole are called just that, 'novels'. Yet *Ivanhoe* is called 'A Romance' in its subtitle, *Quentin Durward* the same in the opening words of its 1831 preface, and most of the other titles are given the guardedly neutral name of 'Tales'. The most interesting case is that of *Waverley*, with its ambiguous preface and the equally ambiguous reference in the 1829 preface to *Guy Mannering*, which mentions 'the Novel or Romance of *Waverley*'. Regarding this ambiguity, see below, n. 5.

³ This selection from Morgan and Maturin is comprehensive and illustrative enough for my present purposes; for the sake of completeness I should add that Morgan wrote another 'National Tale' called *Florence Macarthy* (1818), and that part of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and most of his *Women; or, Pour et Contre* (1818) are set in Ireland.

respects. Two questions thus pose themselves: which type of fiction were Morgan and Maturin trying to write, and to what extent do their tales reflect a tension between the poetics of the prose romance and the poetics of the novel?

Of course, the distinction between 'Romance' and 'Novel' was not wholly of Scott's making. He invoked Dr Johnson's Dictionary (as he might also have invoked the more famous generic distinction made in *The Rambler*, no. 4 (31 March 1750)), and did not so much invent these generic divisions as succinctly and successfully formulate them.⁴ The two Irish authors share with Scott (as I shall show) the same set of audience expectations as well as literary-historical circumstances. More important, Morgan's and Maturin's Irish tales share an important characteristic with some of Scott's own Scottish tales as regards their choice of setting: the local background can invoke a polarity between an 'English' and a 'Gaelic' part of the country: Highlands v. Lowlands in Scotland, Catholic Gaels v. Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. What is more, that division seems to have led to parallel modes of representation.

In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, the most pronounced literary connotation of a Gaelic setting was an Ossianic one. After Macpherson's fraudulently fabricated pseudo-translations of the 1760s, 'Ossian' had profoundly influenced the current image of Gaeldom. Described in the ponderous and sublime diction of prose-poems, Macpherson's Ossian evoked mountains, dark and stormy nights, tragic heroes, and hoary sages sadly strumming the harp: in short, an iconography evoking (to use Burke's aesthetic distinction) sublimity rather than beauty, and harking back to medieval romance as well as foreshadowing the onset of Romanticism.

The sublime/Romantic register is reserved, both by Scott and by his Irish counterparts, for their Gaelic settings. However, it must be said that Scott only rarely drew his local Scottish colour from the Highlands, *Waverley* and *Rob Roy* being the most notable examples. In *Waverley*, the Scottish Highlands are the setting for a romantic interlude where Flora MacIvor sings an old Scottish ballad for Waverley, accompanying herself on the harp. That song is itself overtly reminiscent of Ossian ('There is mist on the mountains, and night on the vale, | But more dark is the sleep of the Sons of the Gael!'), and so is the setting: the waterfall is called 'romantic', set in a 'sylvan amphitheatre' described as 'the land of romance'. Also, Waverley himself is likened to 'a knight of romance', and Flora is 'like a fair enchantress of Boiardo and Ariosto'. The narrative, in short, has moved from a novelistic to a romantic register, which is underscored by the words with which Flora introduces her performance:

To speak in the poetical language of my country, the seat of the Celtic Muse is in the mist of the secret and solitary hill, and her voice in the murmur of the mountain stream. He who woos her must love the barren rock more than the fertile valley, and the solitude of the desert better than the festivity of the hall. (p. 105)

We may safely translate this into generic terms: the romance is the genre of the mist of the secret and solitary hill, of the mountain stream, of the barren rock, of

⁴ For famous generic distinctions between romantic and novelistic prose fiction (such as Johnson in *The Rambler*, Hawthorne in the preface to his *The House of the Seven Gables*, spanning a century bisected by Scott), see Gillian Beer's brief but useful *The Romance* (London, 1969).

solitude and the desert; the novel is, rather, the genre of the fertile valley and of the festivity of the hall.⁵

The same sublime/Romantic register is used when Morgan and Maturin describe Gaelic Ireland. The most striking instance is found in the trail-blazer for this type of setting, Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Here, as in Scott's *Waverley* (which it predates by eight years), the hero moves from a more-or-less mundane background into an uncouth region beyond the pale of civilization, where he becomes involved in what Dr Johnson would have called 'wild adventure': young Henry Mortimer, a splenetic English socialite, winds up in the West of Ireland where he expiates his gambling debts. Close to his family's Irish estate he finds a crumbling gothic castle still tenanted by one of the old Gaelic nobility, the Prince of Inismore, who (like Ossian) is a living fossil of the bygone greatness of Gaeldom, bemoaning the fading of its ancient glory. This Prince, however, has a beautiful and intelligent daughter, Glorvina, whose manifold accomplishments change Mortimer's *ennui* into romantic infatuation; and so the tale moves, through the meanderings of improbable incident and extensive descriptions of local colour, towards a happy marriage.

Yet a tension between the two cultural and political allegiances is felt here as much as in *Waverley*. Beautiful Flora MacIvor is dedicated to the romantic but hopeless cause of the Pretender, and the love affair between Mortimer and Glorvina is fraught with difficulties because they represent inimical national camps: English settlers and ousted Gaels.

Indeed, far more so than in the case of Scotland, an Irish setting implies painful social divisions and political antagonisms. From an early date onwards Irish society had been radically divided in a colonial spirit. On the one hand there was a small privileged class of settlers, relying on their links with England for maintaining their prerogatives, and on the other hand a majority of the dispossessed native population, who had been ousted from their land and stripped of many elementary civil rights. The distinction between the two was made on the criterion of religion, and found jurisprudential expression in a legal code of anti-Catholic 'apartheid' measures. Although the conciliatory politics of the late eighteenth century had to some extent relaxed the rigour of this system of anti-Catholic discrimination and dispossession, the division of Ireland into two nations, Protestant Anglo-Irish and Catholic Gaels, was to persist until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1828 and the dismantling of the landlord system in the late nineteenth century.

Thus, when middle-class, urban, English-speaking Anglo-Irish authors began to use 'Ireland' as a literary topic, they were dealing with an inherently ambiguous theme, riddled with antagonisms which in the immediate past (the 1798 rebellion) had led to violent civil war. Was 'Ireland' the country of Anglo-Irish society, of the circles in which these novelists moved, the circles to which the novel, that most bourgeois of genres, inherently belongs? Or was it the more exotic other Ireland,

⁵ The scene in question is Chapter 22 of *Waverley*, edited by Claire Lamont (Oxford, 1981), pp. 103-07. Although *Waverley* predates Scott's essay on 'Romance' contemporaries already noted critically that the author here sacrificed novelistic plausibility for the picturesque allure of a romantic scene. See my 'Over de ontologische status en de tekstuele situering van imago's: Exotisme en voetnoten in Walter Scott's *Waverley*', in *Deugdelijk Vermaak: Opstellen over literatuur en filosofie in de negentiende eeuw*, edited by E. Eweg (Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 125-35. Also, more generally, Herbert Grierson, 'History and the Novel', in Herbert Grierson, Edwin Muir, G. M. Young, and S. C. Roberts, *Sir Walter Scott Lectures 1940-1948* (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 31-51; James P. Kerr, 'Fiction Against History: The Uses of Romance in the *Waverley* Novels', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Rutgers University, 1986.

with its more sublime scenery, its picturesque folkways and different, Gaelic culture, its fresh potential for interesting *couleur locale*?

Irish fiction of the early nineteenth century reflects this dilemma. Some tales, such as *The Wild Irish Girl*, opt whole-heartedly for the register of the romance; others, such as Maria Edgeworth's 'Tales of Fashionable Life' (including *Ennui*, *The Absentee*) are set in drawing-rooms of country houses and castles, and are as novelistic in plot as they are genteel in their setting, following, on the whole, a Burney/Austen mode. Those cases testify, then, to a split in the treatment of an Irish setting: the 'festivity of the hall' of upper-class Anglo-Ireland will be the setting for novelistic fictions, whereas misty hills and mountain streams are the domain of Gaelic Ireland and romantic adventures.

Yet again, the ambiguity of an Irish setting will necessarily manifest itself, and the political irreconcilability of Ireland's dividedness will pose itself as a generic dilemma to the author. Edgeworth's novels, though novels they essentially are, do contain distant echoes of a romantic Gaelic Ireland: secondary characters such as Count O'Halloran in *The Absentee* and King Corny in *Ormond* add touches of exoticism which would have been unavailable in an English setting. Conversely, although the main body of Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* is romance pure and simple, its hero's background (which is foregrounded in the 'Introductory Letters') recalls the novelistic mode of upper-class England. Unlike the unproblematically homogenous settings of Burney's novel *Evelina* or Radcliffe's romance *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the ambivalence of Ireland, be it deployed towards romantic or novelistic ends, necessarily entails the uncomfortable proximity of the chosen genre's opposite number. That this could be felt as a problematic dilemma between the contrary dictates of generic poetics is illustrated by two cases: Maturin's *The Wild Irish Boy* and Morgan's *O'Donnel*.

Maturin, now remembered chiefly for his *Melmoth the Wanderer*, had already testified to his taste for gothic romance with earlier work in fiction and drama; with *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) he wanted to try his hand at something that was both Irish and a novel. However, he found that Irish local colour was irreconcilable with the novelistic genre, and stated as much in his preface:

This novel from its title purports to give some account of a country little known. I lament I have not had time to say more of it; my heart was full of it, but I was compelled by the laws of this mode of composition to consult the pleasure of my readers, not my own. The fashionable materials for novel-writing I know to be, a lounge in Bond-street, a phaeton-tour in the Park, a masquerade with appropriate scenery, a birth-day or birth-night, with dresses and decorations, accurately copied from the newspapers. He who writes with an hope of being read, must write something like this.⁶

And something like this is what Maturin wrote — a novel of fashionable life. Despite its Morgan-derived title, the book is not at all 'Wild Irish'; almost all the action is laid among the upper classes to which the hero belongs, and the only shadow of Gaelic Ireland is vested in the minor characters of the chieftain De Lacy and his chaplain, who are treated much like Edgeworth's Count O'Halloran and King Corny.

Morgan herself ran into similar problems when she followed up *The Wild Irish Girl* with her tale *O'Donnel* (1814). She began this book as an attempt at a fictional treatment of Irish historical materials, intending *O'Donnel* to be a historical novel set

⁶ Dennis Jasper Murphy [Charles Maturin], *The Wild Irish Boy*, 2 vols (London, 1808), 1, 5.

in the times of Red Hugh O'Donnel (c. 1571–1602, one of the last sovereign Gaelic chieftains to resist English hegemony in Ireland). However, Morgan found that the theme was too violent, too 'hot' to handle, and in her preface, like Maturin, she stated her failure to deal with the topic; she 'found it necessary to forego [her] original plan', because the violence of Irish history involved 'events which the interests of humanity require to be for ever buried in oblivion'.⁷ The reworked version accordingly goes easy on violence and passion and opts for a more sedate novelistic register: like Maturin's *The Wild Irish Boy* it is essentially a novel of social manners. The action revolves around the vapid character of Lady Singleton and her circle, an English noblewoman who visits Ireland and lures the eponymous hero, heir to the O'Donnel chieftaincy, to her coterie in London, where he is ridiculed by snobbish socialites.

In such cases, Morgan and Maturin describe (with varying degrees of irony and jaundice) a high-life of fashionable intercourse, parties, and flirtations, thus further establishing a genre which eventually culminates in the 'silver fork' school of Thomas Hook, Mrs Gore, Lady Blessington, and Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*. Such settings (where Morgan and Maturin sometimes all too enthusiastically indulge in lavish descriptions of that high life which they purport to satirize) make little distinction between fashionable scenes set in Britain or in Ascendancy Ireland; if there is any local colour at all, it often boils down to the fact that the Irish upper circles are less truly aristocratic than the English nobility whose example they emulate, and their titles have more blatantly been obtained by political venality.

Yet again, we can see Maturin and Morgan straining against the dictates of the novelistic register. Their choice of an Irish setting attracts them forcibly towards the exotic fascination with that other Ireland which is set amid scenes of sublime natural splendour, populated by pauperized but picturesque peasants and by descendants of the ousted Gaelic nobility who live out a life of remembered greatness and contemporary oppression. That other, romantic Ireland which Morgan had celebrated in *The Wild Irish Girl* does find a surreptitious way into *O'Donnel*, notwithstanding the novel's socialite setting. Morgan sets the scene when Lady Singleton and her party travel into the Irish countryside and end up in the house of the last surviving heir to the O'Donnel chieftaincy:

The wanderers now issued from the gloom of the mountain ravine into a glen formed in the midst of an amphitheatre of rocks, which, by an abrupt opening, admitted a full view of the noble estuary of Lough Swilly. The drifting winds, which swept over the waters, had scattered away every vapour from before the face of the heavens; and the moon, broad and resplendent, threw a flood of silver light upon a scene indescribably wild and romantic. On the summit of one of the shelving rocks, a ruin of some extent was visible, and underneath its shadows, and almost of one substance with the cliff of which it seemed a part, a small house or cottage was rendered most distinguishable by the smoke of its chimney. It was a formless but picturesque structure, evidently raised out of the materials of the ruins which mouldered about it, and within view of the steep torrent, which descending from the mountains, dashed from point to point of the rocks over which it flowed, and formed a small but noisy stream, on its passage through the glen to Lough Swilly. (I, 269–70)

Such a set-piece of romantic interest and sublime landscape description within the more mundane context of a novel recalls, even in various points of phrasology, the above-mentioned scene from Scott's *Waverley*, and the parallel can be followed further. Much as Flora evokes Highland antiquity in her song, so too do Lady

⁷ Lady Morgan, *O'Donnel: A National Tale*, 3 vols (London, 1814), I, x–xi.

Singleton and the others encounter old Ireland by way of a quotation. For in O'Donnel's house (the one sanctuary of romantic interest in what is otherwise a contemporary, quotidian social novel) they find a manuscript book containing the O'Donnel family history, which is interpreted as a series of digressionary chapters — a stratagem which allows Morgan to make use of the historical materials around which (as she admitted in her preface) she was unable to centre her narrative.

But there is an even more widespread strategy of 'including Gaelic Romance in the novelistic context'. In almost all the books under review here, the central character, narrator, or focalizer is genteel, cosmopolitan, enters Ireland from abroad, and in the course of that Irish penetration takes the narrative from fashionable life towards 'wild adventure'. It is thus in *The Wild Irish Girl*, in *The Wild Irish Boy* (whose hero Ormsby Bethel moves from England to Ireland), in Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (whose main hero returns to the scenes of his youth after a military career in the Austrian service). That pattern has been described by one critic as follows:

A person of eminence arrives in Ireland; he (or she) possesses every qualification for a rich and interesting life, yet nothing noteworthy has ever happened to him, and he is full of spleen until, once there, he is dragged into a whirl of undreamt-of adventures, his former habits, prejudices and ways of thinking suddenly give way to an all-absorbing passion, which irresistibly hurries him towards bliss or destruction, as the case may be.⁸

The most telling example here is Maturin's *The Milesian Chief* (1812), which can be seen as the fulfilment of a 'Wild Irish' novel which Maturin was unable to produce in *The Wild Irish Boy*. The central character in *The Milesian Chief* through whom most of the narrative is focalized, is a young woman called Armida, who after a genteel and artistic upbringing in Italy moves with her family to Ireland. Here she acquires two suitors: one, a fashionable officer in the military service of the government, the other a brooding, Byronic young Gael raised in a gothic ruin by his old, fanatically anti-English grandfather. Thus Armida's amorous dilemma occasions an oscillation between high-society soirées on the one hand and sublime stormy landscapes on the other. The incident in each case matches the setting: the soirées are full of dialogue, witty or fatuous, the Gaelic landscape engenders near-fatal accidents and daring rescues, or chance encounters like a wandering blind bard on the beach, obviously cloned from Ossian:

She heard the sound of an instrument, faint, tremulous, and wild. It was the Irish harp, touched by a native on his own wild shores, and accompanied by a voice, which, though broken by age, sounded like music in despair . . . The instrument was defective, and the hand of the performer weak with age; but Armida forgot all science while she listened to him, and felt the effect of the scenery united with the sound. The music, though unlike any she had ever praised as excellent, had a charm superior to that excellence: it had a character impossible to define, but impossible to resist: it appealed from rules to the heart, and its simplicity made the appeal resistless, as the inarticulate cry of infancy affects more deeply than the utmost eloquence of distress. Armida, nursed in the classic elegance of Italian melody, wept as she listened to the rude song of the Irish bard. (1, 63-64)

Of her two suitors, Armida prefers the young Gael, Connal O'Morven, the book's tragic hero — and his fate gives the book its more gloomy hue. When Armida and Connal meet the bard again, his Ossianic traits (use of the descriptive genitive,

⁸ Niilo Idman, *Charles Robert Maturin: His Life and Works* (Helsingfors, 1923), p. 70. Much the same point was made by Barry Sloan in his *The Pioneers of Anglo-Irish Fiction 1800-1850* (Gerrards Cross and Totowa, New Jersey, 1986), pp. 41-42.

prophetic prescience, Aeolian effects on the harp-strings being treated as the playing of ghosts) begin to overshadow the course of future events:

'Daughter of Beauty!' he exclaimed in the impassioned language of his country, 'the sound of your voice makes me bewail the loss of my sight again. Oh! if my harp had but one string left, that one string should be alive with your praise.' ...

He again touched his harp, and Connal said with animated fondness, 'Give us, Cormac, the sweetest song that ever was inspired by love and beauty.'

At the moment the old man bent over his harp in a trance of feeling, a loud blast of wind swept across the strings, and the sound, deep and mournful, resembled a human groan as it passed along the heath.

The old man shuddered: he dropped the harp, and his sightless eyes rolled in their sockets with a force that seemed stronger than actual sight.

'The hand of death is on my harp!' he exclaimed: 'there is a spirit in the air — the voices of other days strike my ear — there is a spirit in the air! I feel his touch on my heart! I see him though I am blind! O'Morven, he whispers, "No song of youth or love!" O'Morven, he bids me sing of woe and death!'

... And with the inspiration, the solemn fury of a prophet, he struck the chords that for centuries past had summoned the funeral procession to the grave of an O'Morven, and echoed the dreadful cry that was raised over the corse. (II, 99–101)

The Milesian Chief from this point onwards becomes a fey tale of tragic rebellion, Connal O'Morven (heir of an ousted Gaelic chieftaincy) being involved in a hopeless uprising against the authorities. Gothic touches are added in increasing profusion: witness the introduction of a stock character from the gothic iconography in the figure of the evil Italian priest Morosini, who attempts to debauch Armida during confession. Eventually the tale progresses to a horrific catastrophe when, amidst the ruin of Connal's rebellion, Armida is led away from the battlefield by a less than trustworthy servant, who clearly has evil designs on her chastity, and is brought to a cavern on the beach where Connal's grandfather lies, quite mad, and on the point of expiry. He thinks that Armida is Queen Elizabeth and wants to revenge all old grievances of the Gaels on her. Between the raving madman and the lecherous menial, Armida in her cavern is in dire straits indeed: a far cry from the salons and parties in the capital where she used to move, or those which were visited by splenetic Ormsby Bethel in *The Wild Irish Boy*.

The Milesian Chief, before it succumbs to the author's more lurid gothic proclivities, offers a remarkable solution to the generic ambiguity which seems to be pre-inscribed in the choice of an Irish setting: it explicitly evokes the polarity between the two Irelands, oscillates between them and between their attendant generic registers. Characters move back and forth between drawing-rooms and craggy glens, from eyebrow-raising witticism to hair-raising adventure.

A similar mode of encompassing both Irelands in the same narrative was followed by Lady Morgan in her later book *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* of 1827. In one aspect, it re-enacts a stratagem which she had already used in *O'Donnel*: that of the interpolated manuscript found in an old, Gaelic-owned house, quoted at length as digressionary chapters furnishing Gaelic local colour. But at the same time, Morgan also uses the technique of deliberate oscillations between, and juxtaposition of, the two Irelands. There are frequent and violent scene-changes from parties at the perimeter of the viceregal court to nocturnal adventures in medieval chapels, gloomy mansions, or wild mountains, from ironical descriptions of witty flirtation to gothic evocations of inexplicable apparitions in the dark. A lively traffic takes place between Dublin and Connaught, and even within the capital there are haunts which

require a treatment not unlike the gothicism of Maturin, occasioning sudden, dramatic shifts in narrative tone.

In *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, the contrast between the novelistic and romantic registers is emphasized not only at the level of action and setting but also in the book's dialogue. Lady Knocklofty and her friends lard their discourse with French and Italian expressions, whereas in the West people speak in a strong Irish brogue peppered with Gaelic phrases. Thus, for example, a one-page dialogue between two guests at a masked ball in Dublin gives occasion for the expressions 'taillé à l'antique', 'On ne joue pas aux échecs avec un bon cœur', a friendship 'à l'Allemande', and other friendships 'hérissées de si, et de mais, et de sous-entendus'; someone seems 'désorientée', and a rival is described as follows:

For her beauty, *passé*; and pass it will of itself before long: and for her wit, it is *l'esprit d'anti-chambre*, — *très-gai, et un peu polisson*. But people of the world are not nice. *Tromper leur ennui en le divertissant* is their aim . . . There is nothing in the wit of Lady Honoria; *c'est une flamme sans feu*. (III, 146)

Other fashionable scenes are equally lavish in their use of Italian ('I hear! *guardi il cielo!* . . . such *rifacciamenti* are not for ears like mine' (III, 151)).

Gaelic Ireland in the West harbours a different kind of glossolalia, and allows Morgan to show off her error-ridden smatterings of Gaelic, as when O'Brien reminisces about his boyhood education with his foster-brother Shane:

'And there was a spirited controversial dialogue, too, between St Patrick and Ossian', continued O'Brien . . .

'*Ossin agus St Phaedrig*,' repeated Shane, making the sign of the cross.

'And that sweet old air, of which the burden was, "I am asleep, do not awaken me".'

'*Ta mi mo hoolah, na dushame*' interrupted Shane, not now touched, but rapt.

'And Carolan's receipt, sung by old Donogh!'

'Ay, Musha,' chuckled Shane, 'a great *abra, Donogh an abhac*, a great *gramog*.' (II, 314)

In contrast to the various foreign (French/Italian) phrases from the salons, those Gaelic terms are all glossed in footnotes and thus almost rendered exotic (because deemed incomprehensible) by the very act of explanation. The contrast thus once again becomes that between urbane cosmopolitanism, shared by author and reader, and archaic uncouthness, where the author becomes a mediator and translator, explaining a foreign, alien culture to the readership.

Indeed, such authorial interventions seem to reflect directly the ambiguity of these narratives between a novelistic and a romantic intent. Although the romance requires colourful incident and a sublime setting, here purveyed by Gaelic Ireland, the novel-readership requires a mode of relating the setting to known experience and available information. The curious result is that in texts like these, the narrative is encumbered with a great deal of explanatory footnotes, at precisely those moments where it is most romantic. At such points, the exoticism of the sublime setting over-strains the novelistic proviso of *vraisemblance*, and the author will tend to back up implausible descriptions with attesting, by way of a footnote, the truth-value of the representation, thus accommodating the presence of romance-like passages to the realistic expectations of a novel-audience, saying, in effect, 'se non è ben trovato, è vero'.⁹ Such footnotes abound throughout early Anglo-Irish novels wherever they

⁹ Scott does something like that in the aforementioned passage from *Waverley*, which contemporaries criticized for being contrived and implausible: he added a footnote to a later edition vindicating his description and its impeached *vraisemblance*.

begin to draw on the romantic exoticism of their *couleur locale*. Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* simply teems with notes where she says that she is relying either on personal experience or else on the trustworthy testimony of historians and antiquarians; in Maturin, too, one comes across footnote comments such as 'taken from life'.¹⁰

The reflection of Ireland's cultural and political dividedness in generic terms thus seems well established. Bourgeois and genteel Ireland is a subject for the novel, Gaelic rural Ireland is rather fit for the romance. How difficult the two registers were to reconcile, I have shown. But that distinction has one added dimension which I have not yet addressed.

I return to Scott's distinction between 'Romance' and 'Novel'. It is striking that almost surreptitiously he smuggles into the definition of the novel a temporal element, in that it deals with 'the modern state of society'. Something similar occurs in Scott's essay 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition',¹¹ where a belief in supernatural occurrences is correlated with the genre of the romance, with the earlier stages of individual development (childhood), and with the earlier stages of Western literature (folk literature, the Middle Ages). Obviously, then, in such a scheme, the novel, which follows ordinary human experience, will tend towards the quotidian and indeed contemporary scope of the audience, whereas the wild adventures of the romance will more easily be set in remoter times.

Accordingly, there is also a temporal distinction between novelistic plausibility and romantic adventure. The books under review here show that, indeed, their novelistic content deals with contemporary manners and the 'modern state of society'; so far, however, we have not seen the characters time-travel into the past when they move from their salons into the countryside. Or have we?

It can be said that romantic exoticism will work on a chronological as well as on a geographical axis: that the exoticism of distant and picturesque places frequently goes together with the exoticism of distant and picturesque historical periods. The existence of such a link between spatial and temporal exoticism has been convincingly illustrated by the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, who has elucidated the tendency of ethnological discourse to situate its object in the past: witness the use of ambiguous terms such as 'primitive' or the currency of clichés like 'such-and-such a Papua tribe still lives in the Stone Age'.¹² Accordingly, the reader will have noticed how the distinction between the two Irelands has been aligned in the texts discussed and quoted here not only into the dichotomies between Novel/Romance and Beauty/Sublimity but also into the one between Culture and Nature. Following Fabian's argument, that set of dichotomies will also entail a congruent distinction between Present and Past (or Progress and Stasis).

¹⁰ On *The Wild Irish Girl* and its footnotes, see my 'How *The Wild Irish Girl* Made Ireland Romantic', *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 18 (1988), 209-27; as regards Maturin, see, for example, *The Milesian Chief*, I, 127, and IV, 204, ascertaining a description of Irish dress by referring to a scholarly source; or *The Wild Irish Boy*, I, 104 and note. It may be added that even in the comparatively mundane tale of *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth finds herself compelled to throw her personal credit behind some of the descriptions, and states in footnotes that she has herself witnessed some of the scenes which might strain her readers' credulity.

¹¹ Originally in *Foreign Quarterly*, here quoted from *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, pp. 431-68.

¹² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983). Fabian calls this 'the denial of coevalness' and explains it from Western conceptualizations of time and from a view of history characterized by an ethnocentrist teleology. A compatible conclusion was reached by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (London, 1978), where he shows how the Orient was often represented in its pastness and archaic ('biblical', 'medieval') lifestyle.

The tendency to view alien/foreign culture as reflecting older periods in human history (which was especially strong in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought)¹³ also marked the iconography of Gaelic Ireland in English-educated minds. Antiquarians (those amateur archeological enthusiasts of the eighteenth century whom Scott ironically portrayed in his own *The Antiquary*) had investigated the Irish past and created an image of Gaelic Ireland that was inherently characterized by its pastness: the most genuine and least adulterated form of Gaelic culture was that of the past, before the contamination of the English presence in Ireland. It was this antiquarian-derived image of Gaelic Ireland which Anglo-Irish authors in need of Gaelic local colour drew on: witness the aforementioned footnote references so liberally indulged in by authors such as Maturin and (especially) Morgan.¹⁴

Thus, a natural tendency to conflate spatial and temporal exoticism was reinforced by the very provenance of the established, Ossianic-cum-antiquarian iconography of Gaelic Ireland on which these authors drew. Gaelic Ireland is inherently a matter of the past, a survival of bygone ages, a living fossil of older times, existing only in those places where it has not yet been adulterated by the influence of contemporary European civilization — and this mode of representing Gaelic Ireland once again ties in with the romance's general proclivity for ancient ruins and archaic settings.

We can register various repercussions of that principle in the Irish tales of Morgan and Maturin. To begin with, Gaelic Ireland is not just the counterpart of Anglicized middle-class and upper-class Ireland, not just one of the two Irelands. Anglo-Ireland is seen as a part of contemporary life in general, part of Europe, participating in the cosmopolitanism of genteel refinement and drawing on a stock of European manners (witness the English or Continental upbringing of various heroes, and the currency of French and Italian in the Dublin salons). From this European appurtenance, Gaelic Ireland is excluded, exoticized, rusticated. Anglo-Ireland is domestic, Gaelic Ireland is foreign, alien. To go into Gaelic Ireland means leaving Europe, leaving civilization as we know it.

Another result is the fact that Gaelic Ireland, characterized by its pastness, exists only in certain discrete areas cordoned off from the normal world. The natural amphitheatre in *Waverley* where Flora sings her old song is echoed in Morgan's description of the setting of O'Donnel's residence: inaccessible mountain ranges, glens and valleys, castles in liminal settings like islands or the seashore, gloomy and almost collapsing old mansions in deserted, no-longer-fashionable parts of Dublin: such are the places where Gaelic Ireland is also situated; characters have to perform an almost liminal transgression to cross from the 'modern state of society' into 'the land of romance'. In these places the acme of local colour or pastness is encountered, either in the form of living fossils (the Prince of Inismore, in *The Wild Irish Girl*, being the Ossian-derived prototype) or else in the form of a text: the song Flora sings to

¹³ For a survey of illustrative material, see P. J. Marshall and G. Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982). A good discussion of this attitude and its concomitant 'de-historicization of Non-Europe' is P. B. M. Blaas's *Anachronisme en historisch besef: Momenten uit de ontwikkeling van het Europees Historisch Bewustzijn* (Rotterdam and The Hague, 1988).

¹⁴ The authorities for their descriptions of Gaelic lifestyle are antiquarians such as Vallancey, O'Halloran, Ledwich, and J. C. Walker. For a further discussion of antiquarian practice and its influence on the image of Gaelic Ireland, see my *Mere Irish & Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1986).

Waverley, the bard's gloomy croonings in *The Milesian Chief*, the family history in *O'Donnel*, the chronicle in *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*.

Finally, what is remarkable is the ahistoricism of Gaelic Ireland: such local colour evokes not so much a recognizable heritage from the past surviving in the present as a mishmash of antiquarian items from the most diverse periods. The desire to furnish local colour means that the Irish past is ransacked for whatever is unusual, uncouth, or picturesque, and the result is rampant anachronism. Both Morgan and Maturin are fond of introducing characters wearing 'the old Gaelic dress' and the old Gaelic hairdo, whereas the dress and hairstyle thus described vanished no later than 1600; likewise the Shane-figure in *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* is described as a surviving 'rapparee', which would be comparable to introducing a surviving frontiersman in a novel by John Updike: a wearying list of further instances could be added. In other words, the Irish past as it comes to the surface in these representations is not really a history but rather an ill-organized museum of antiquarian curios and collectables.

All these factors essentially reduce the notion of Irish history to a stasis, an undifferentiated pool of diverse mementos and memories. The Irish past is arranged into an extratemporal iconography where St Patrick, the eleventh-century Brian Boru, and the sixteenth-century Red Hugh O'Donnel exist cheek by jowl with medieval Round Towers, Ossianic harpists, and contemporary Gaelic-speaking peasants, in sublime landscapes dimly visible on the horizon. An extreme, but far from insignificant instance of this effect is the time-warped, liminal setting of the aforementioned catastrophe of *The Milesian Chief*: the cavern on the sea-shore, where (in the eyes of a dying, mad Gael) modern Armida becomes Queen Elizabeth.

The use of an Irish setting (or, more particularly, the inclusion of a Gaelic setting in contemporary narrative) thus drives authors such as Morgan and Maturin unavoidably towards anachronism and generic ambiguity (between romance and novel, as well as between fiction and footnotes). As both state in various prefaces, they found themselves unable to situate their tales in other than contemporary settings, and as a result had to perform odd twists and turns to incorporate Gaelic Ireland, which they viewed in terms of its pastness, within their contemporary narratives.

Their dilemma was reinforced, perhaps, by the political tensions of a country that was still under the shadow of civil war and violent agitation. Scott found, in writing *Waverley*, that he was treading on thin ice when he evoked the radical enmities which fed the rebellion of 1745, then sixty years in the past, and the enmities in Ireland were far more radical, far more ingrained, far more topical. Novelists or would-be novelists found that both the poetics of their genre and the politics of their time disallowed too close a preoccupation or identification with Gaelic Ireland, and therefore it may be said that their unresolved problems in creating within English conventions an Irish historical novel represent not just an interesting case history in the early development of a new fictional genre but also a remarkable instance of interaction between literary and political developments.

That correlation between generic and political developments also appears if we contrast the failure of Morgan and Maturin with the success of Scott; on the one hand, the difference between the Irish authors and their Scottish counterpart might be explained by the fact that Scott brought more historical integrity and reliability into his novels: that, in a manner of speaking, Morgan and Maturin deal with the

past like antiquarians, and Scott does so more like a historian. But there is more to this. The problem for Morgan and Maturin lies in the fact that they set their tales in a contemporary framework, in which the romantic and archaic appeal of Gaelic local colour must inevitably become anachronistic, whereas Scott can situate the entire actions of his novels in past periods. Upon closer reflection, however, it appears that the contemporary setting forcibly imposed itself in the Irish case, that the historical option *à la* Scott was politically unfeasible in the Irish context, for the Anglo-Irish upper classes in Ireland were essentially unrooted in Ireland, had no past in that country.

Moreover, if Scott wants to draw on Scottish local colour, he can find a plethora of it within the Lowlands of Scotland, with its radical un-Englishness, its racy speech *à la* Meg Merrilies, and its quaint customs. It is, strictly speaking, not necessary for him to draw on Celtic, Highland material for his local colour as the un-English, characteristically Scottish nature of the Lowlands and the Border provides sufficient store of it: apart from *Waverley* and *Rob Roy*, Celtic exoticism is a relatively rare occurrence in Scott's *œuvre*.

The Irish case is far different. There was no Irish local colour except in Gaeldom, because Anglo-Ireland, rootless as it was, had to rely on its close British links to maintain its hold in that country, and constantly conformed itself to its mainstay, the Mother Country, England. Thus, a tale that is both Irish and a novel is, in a way, a contradiction in terms. A novelistic setting means Anglo-Ireland, means something cloned from, and indistinguishable from, England itself; it means something imported and without a national Irish past. Conversely, an Irish setting means Gaeldom, means straying from a novelistic into a romantic register, means something dispossessed, disaffected, and without a present or future. In a way, then, the difference between Scott and Morgan and Maturin reflects the historical difference between Scotland and Ireland within the British national system: Scotland as England's sister kingdom, Ireland as England's colony.

The hybrid vacillation of Morgan and Maturin between a novelistic and a romantic register seriously flaws their Irish tales, often to the point of ludicrousness. But in the development of the literary representation of Ireland their treatment of local colour had important effects: it perpetuated, and translated into the field of prose fiction, a form of Celtic exoticism which has not yet lost its currency or its appeal. The Ossianic (Romantic, achronic) view of Celtic culture as being lost on the edges of the world and on the fringes of history, beyond civilization and the passage of time, was perpetuated by them and was to prove influential in the subsequent development of a Celtic stereotype, with its impact on Anglo-Irish literature and politics. Morgan and Maturin were essentially the first to voice the literary-political formula that Ireland is a country tragically caught between its past and its present, its dreams and its realities.