Romantic Union: Wordsworth, Ireland, and Reflections on the Revolution in France

W.J. Mc Cormack

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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter discusses the mushrooming of the romantic age in Ireland particularly in its literature and language. Discussion herein concerns the work of Burke, especially, the Reflections on the Revolution in France, a work of political and cultural significance which influenced various writers and figures of the 19th century. Reflections was a narration of the violent pretensions of ascendancy party in Ireland, a literary enactment of romantic assumptions and a political philosophy of Augustan and Jacobinism. The chapter also discusses the influence made by the essay to the works of other writers in Ireland, particularly Wordsworth who carried the tone of Burke to his writings, for example in his Prelude.

Keywords: Ireland, Burke, Reflections, ascendancy, Jacobinism, Wordsworth

There have been many antirevolutionary books written in favour of the Revolution. Burke has written a revolutionary book against the Revolution.
One of the few generalizations in literary history which stands up to scrutiny is that romanticism is a European rather than an English or a French phenomenon. Given the close association of romanticism and nationalism, it is also a generalization which helps to broaden the basis of literary history from any self-defining local integrity. But if critics and commentators have learned that Goethe can shed light on Scott, and that Chateaubriand is not wholly irrelevant to an interest in Keats, the result has too often been a cosmopolitan indifference to the particular interactions of social and aesthetic concerns in Germany, France, and Britain. In place of the spurious relating of literature to social life which characterized the various national histories, the various literatures are subordinated to a Great Code which excludes all social life. It is not intended here to replace the well-worn legend that Anglo-Irish fiction is about the Big House and Anglo-Irish poetry about ‘the discovery of the Gaelic past’ with a synchrony in which Maria Edgeworth tangos with De Quincey. The dynamics of literary history do not accept the empirical distinction between concrete detail and abstraction, and text is not regarded as an inviolable sanctuary. If we subject *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to a species of stylistic analysis this is not to deny its political material but rather to extend our concern with that material to aspects which have too often been regarded as secondary. If metaphor is treated as *(p.19)* a form of politics, it goes without saying that the self-contained entity known as Ireland necessarily is reinserted in the complex relations of the romantic age.
Renowned from the outset for its influence in changing opinion, Burke's *Reflections* (1790) came to embody a fixed star in conservative ideology in the nineteenth century. Burke's impact on figures as diverse as Benjamin Disraeli and Alfred Tennyson and Matthew Arnold is but a further indicator of the continuity of that influence which is first measurable in the literary world through the novels of Jane Austen and Walter Scott. Augustan, romantic, Victorian ... the fixity which Burke came to represent for generations of British thinkers is itself a movement of immediate political and cultural significance. Disraelian imperialism and Arnoldian visions of the Celt are alike indebted to the author of the *Reflections*. And the apparently opposed scales and pro-portions of these areas of development—global policy, domestic policy, India, and Skibbereen—are already present in the terms of Burke's politics, Burke's aesthetics.

For politics and aesthetics come together in Burke in a conjunction of the most profound significance. There is a line of development between ideas explored by Burke as early as 1756 in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* and the famous apostrophe to Marie Antoinette in the *Reflections*. But the biographical line of consistency or development is less pertinent than the extensive links which locate the *Reflections* in the context of Wordsworth's 'Prelude', Coleridge's *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, and Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Nor is this to invoke influence as some personal, biographical debt which the poets and novelists owe to the politician—Wordsworth's own employment of the term in such poems as 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Michael' should suggest a more complex relationship—rather it is to point to the intensively literary priorities and preoccupations of the *Reflections* and the mediate access thus afforded us to the politics of fiction and poetry. For a radical such as Paine, of course, Burke's lingering upon the frailties of the Queen's (p.20) position was an evasion of the real—attention to the plumage and neglect of the dying bird. Yet it is that dichotomy between ornament and use, the illusory and the real, the literary and the political which Burke's work drastically challenges.
From the outset, the *Reflections* attracted attention to its language, and much of the evidence marshalled in James Boulton’s *Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* is critical of Burke’s use of imagery and metaphor. Doubtless, Burke’s style—so conceived—is massively and energetically effective, but it would be mistaken to assume that stricter notions of literary form, and considerations of contemporary literary practice, can be separated from personal style. Polemic, narrative, and metaphor in the *Reflections* contribute to a synthesis which at once enacts and exposes certain preoccupations which run deep in English romanticism and in what we have learned to call Anglo-Irish literature. Indeed, the politics of Burke’s sublime and beautiful, as enforced in the epoch of the French Revolution, constitutes one statement—others are available in economic or social terms—of the principles of that essentially fragmentary and separatist ‘tradition’ of romantic nationalism. Tradition will come to imply, virtually to impose, a unitary concept of continuity and unity, but its romantic origins attest—as does the Irish politics of Union—to the characteristically divided and reciprocal (to go no further) nature of such a movement. One’s interest in Anglo-Irish literature, or in the Irish language, or in the velleities of Sean O Faolain, is determined not by some endearing merit dormant in such material but by the necessity of a material history which incorporates Europe and India and America. The Anglo-Irish novel is launched by Maria Edgeworth and we have come to acknowledge that unremarkable truism; what remains crucially to be achieved is the demonstration of that ‘fragmentary union’ which is Burke’s contribution to the aesthetics of Anglo-Irish fiction.

The thrust and tone of Burke’s *Reflections* are well known. And yet the important task before us is not economically to summarize the agreed argument of that familiar work but rather to seize upon the distinctions between its past (p.21) significance and present meaning with especial reference to the trajectory in literary history we call Anglo-Irish literature. In time we shall refer in some detail to the particular narratives and pervasive metaphors of the work, but for the moment a reminder of its ostensible form is needed. The *Reflections* is a letter addressed to a young French gentleman in Paris and written as one continuous sequence of sentences. This specific form is crucial in Burke’s tactic of adopting the role of political sage, of the master addressing his pupil.² In
this of course it shares many characteristics of pamphlet propaganda in the eighteenth century. This has not prevented a recent editor from dividing the text in two Tarts', the first further divided into ten chapters and the second into five, chapters which are then given titles such as 'A Defense of the French Monarchy and Aristocracy'.³ What is significant here is not any sacrilegious interference with the seamless text of 1790; on the contrary, we are watching the dissemination of a present-day ‘Burke as methodical political scientist’ in the context of American public education. Arguments deployed against the introduction of innovative, deliberate government to the detriment of ancient custom are thus rendered serviceable in defence of custom-less laissez-faire economics. Burke's 'own' contempt for political theory and abstract argument is theorized in defence of the historical descendants of his enemies. Nor is this instance an isolated one; the application of Burke's ideas to the cause of American conservatism in the age of the Cold War, though happily a temporary phenomenon, has its Victorian precedents. Burke as the founder of the modern Conservative Party is of course an anachronism, and yet Walter Bagehot's English Constitution (1865) had, in the words of one sober historian, ‘translated the almost mystical celebrations of Burke and Coleridge into inspired commonplaces’.⁴ The (p.22) celebrations referred to here were Burke’s defence of prescription as the fundamental principle of a landed society. And landed property, with its prescriptive rights attached inviolably, forms the central concern of Burke's polemic in the Reflections. Nevertheless, as Novalis and others recognized, this was no serene, classic statement of unshakeable truth. It partook of the nervous, innovative, revolutionary circumstances into which it intervened.
If we take the broad binary division of the argument into a statement of ‘British Tradition’ and ‘French Enlightenment’, we note different narrative strategies within each. The account of British history is present in reverse-chronology; that is, we are taken back from the present occasion and a specific addressee through the adjustments of 1688 and the Glorious Revolution, the vicissitudes of the Great Rebellion, back ultimately to Magna Carta. British constitutional history is thus taken up to its original fountain-head where it is emblemized in a statement of historical guarantee. French constitutional history, in contrast, is traced downwards from ‘your old states … your ancient states’ to ‘the last generations of your country [which] appeared without much lustre in your eyes’. This contrast in narrative method is entirely at one with Burke’s placing of the present generation—‘People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.’

Other local instances of specific narrative method could be analysed for their political direction, whether unconscious or otherwise. For example, the introduction of The Reverend Dr Price as stalking-horse is subsequently absorbed in the allusion to The Reverend Hugh Peters, who mocked Charles I and was then executed at the Restoration, a narrative strategy which looks forward fearfully to the fate of those who side with Price and the British friends of the revolution. The resemblance of this device to the tactics of the historical novelist prompts thoughts of other points of comparison. Like Waverley, the Reflections advances two rival views of history, and like the Scott novel generally there is both a preference for the organic unity of the past and a recognition of less totally satisfactory circumstances in the present. The device of addressing the Reflections to a very young Frenchman produces an emotional force-field not unlike that generated by Scott’s unremarkable heroes, who in their ordinariness stimulate in the reader a participating sympathy even in their errors. The difference between Scott and Burke as historical fictionalist is essentially that Scott does not relish the tragic denouement. Burke, in characteristic self-division, reluctantly does relish it.
It was Schopenhauer, Nietzsche’s erstwhile master, who suggested that all art aspires to the condition of music. The particular version of romanticism which we find in Burke’s historical narratives suggests that all history aspires to the condition of eternity. In the fusion of The Reverends Price (died 1791) and Peters (executed 1660), Burke comments that the two differ ‘only in place and time’. Such an aspiration to transcend history is offset constantly in Burke by his awareness of the purely negative terms in which transcendence is available to modern man. The conclusion to that famous passage in the Reflections which begins ‘Society is indeed a contract’ ends with a rhetorically heightened meditation on the consequence of human choice succeeding ordained necessity:

if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.

The myth of the Fall is only invoked here at one remove; this world, albeit presented as peaceful and virtuous, is also one of fruitful penitence. The rhetorical emphasis falls upon a more immediate, if officially hypothetical, world of unavailing sorrow. The world of the Revolution is postlapsarian, known and yet unexperienceable except in the most arithmetical formulae, the most abstract relations. This sense of cosmic desolation, detectable in different forms in Wordsworth and Shelley (for whom the political lessons are also drastically different), also suggests affinities between Burke and Hegel, Burke and the early Marx, Burke and Nietzsche. So broadly defined an affinity is perhaps insufficiently fine to be really useful in argument, and the closer, localized context of English romanticism now requires consideration.
What Wordsworth dreaded in Jacobin abstraction and Jacobin social engineering, Shelley and Blake condemned in the society defended by Burke—Hanoverian Britain with its coercive Church and imperial aggression. The consistency of English romanticism does not lie in any political agreement, though English romantics of various political views shared common animosities and sympathies. Dealing in primarily biographical (and psychological) terms, Thomas McFarland has located Wordsworth’s psyche between the extremes of severe egotism and a universal benevolence: ‘Impelled toward but at the same time retreating from both isolation and community, Wordsworth came to be as it were suspended in an emotional force-field between them.’ For McFarland, the resolution of these tensions lay in the poet’s increasing commitment to ‘the significant group’; not humanity at large nor the untrammelled ego, but a significantly intimate and yet extensive group of individuals earned his loyalty and emotional commitment. In the solitaries of Wordsworth’s great poems —‘Resolution and Independence’, ‘Michael’, and of course ‘The Prelude’ itself—there is more concrete and accessible evidence of a dialectical process incorporating solitude and relationship, integrity and integration, in a constantly renewing and sustaining pattern. If one were to turn to the case of Shelley and his reputation, then E. T. Webb and other recent commentators have shown how a comprehensive idealism competed positively with a practical commitment to specific social projects and political causes.

In place of Augustan antithesis, romantic dialectics focused on the objective contradictions of a rapidly developing society experienced in its full European breadth and in the recesses of its common people. The Revolution, and the Grand Alliance against it, made the experience of politics and the experience of war public property.

For comparison with Burke, Wordsworth offers greater scope than Shelley. And the crucially significant group in, his work is not the actual family circle but the ‘statesmen’ of the Lake District:
The domestic affections will always be strong amongst men who live in a country not crowded with population, if these men are placed above poverty. But if they are proprietors of small estates, which have descended to them from their ancestors, the power which these affections will acquire amongst such men is inconceivable ... Their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten. It is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn.12

Less particularly, Burke draws on the same powerful sources of imagery in the Reflections, and in defending ‘the method of nature in the conduct of the state’—that is, hereditable property—he identifies the state with the home:

In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars.13

Not only does Burke give to the state the emotive connotations of intimate family life, he argues that citizenship and social action have their origin in domestic experience:

(p.26) We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting-places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality.14
There is another, more renowned statement of a similar sentiment in the *Reflections*, but it is one which requires attention in the context of its preceding sentences:

Turbulent, discontented men of quality, in proportion as they are puffed up with personal pride and arrogance, generally despise their own order. One of the first symptoms of a selfish and mischievous ambition, is a profligate disregard of a dignity which they partake with others. To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind. The interests of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it; and as none but bad men would justify it in abuse, none but traitors would barter it away for their own personal advantage.\(^\text{15}\)

The assault on turbulent men of quality is noteworthy, for it is Burke's version of that repression of egotism which Wordsworth found it necessary to exercise throughout his career. In general terms Burke condemns, or at least is exceedingly wary of, ‘separate insulated private men’ but the thrust of the *Reflections* is directed more specifically against ‘literary caballers, and intriguing philosophers; with political theologians and theological politicians’.\(^\text{16}\) In short, ‘Men of Letters, fond of distinguishing themselves, are rarely averse to innovation.’\(^\text{17}\) The articulation of caballers or writers is explicitly contrasted to the silent virtue of a rural image of society in its organic continuity:

Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, *p.27* pray do not imagine, that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that of course, they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour.\(^\text{18}\)
Burke does not identify his ‘significant group’ so clearly as Wordsworth but the extremes between which he seeks such a human locus are immediately evident and interconnected. On the one hand, there are the multitudes who are regimented in the newly conceived divisions of Jacobin France, or ‘a swinish multitude’, a society judged by mathematical criteria. On the other, there are insulated men. If this looks like another version of Wordsworthian polarities, we should note in Burke that insulated men contribute to the establishment of schematic societies, departments, communes, and cantons. Historically speaking, one should observe that Wordsworthian fulmination against manufactories and Burkan denunciations of Jacobinism represent the old antithesis of city and country (urbs et rus) in crisis.
In a rather stricter historical sense, the Irish background to Burke's thought in the 1790s cannot be neglected. Dying in 1797, he did not have to face the decisions of 1799 and 1800 in relation to the proposed Union between Britain and Ireland. While speculation as to whether he would have been unionist or anti-unionist is largely pointless in so far as the altered political circumstances arising between 1797 and 1800 are concerned, the metaphoric implications of union *per se* directly relate that issue to Burke's devotion to 'the little platoon'. The romantic age aspired to wholeness and unity and yet was characterized by a profound sense of fragmentary human existences in a disintegrating world. If we accept that the union between Britain and Ireland was sought for conscious, specific political reasons, or if we go beyond this to argue that the union was determined by economic necessity, we do not invalidate the relevance of the intense romantic investment in union as a value. Politically, there was a precedent by which the initiative might be measured—the union with Scotland in 1707. But the Scottish union was generally referred to as resulting from a Treaty of Union, and the implication was that, in the early eighteenth-century sense of the word, this was a union between two *nations*. This implication of official parity was facilitated in that a king of Scotland (James VI) had become king of England (James I), and that the palpable superiority of England in *realpolitik* was balanced by a Scottish dignity in the line of succession. The Irish union enjoyed no such Augustan balance: the means whereby the king of England was also king of Ireland was memorably warlike, and the union was (and is) universally referred to as the *Act* of Union, that is, a parliamentary decision doubly ratified at Westminster and College Green.
As we shall see, the parliament was by the 1790s felt at least by some to be gravely anomalous, not only in relation to the middle-class wealth of Ireland but also in relation to the intrusive power of the London administration. The Irish government, so to speak, operated independent of the Irish parliament, and the existence of the Lord-Lieutenant and Chief Secretary added a further stratum of complexity. If the real motive behind the union was a need to close the gap in British defences by drawing Ireland closer to England, then the uniting of the parliaments (the principal means by which the Union proper was effected) was singularly beside the point, for Ireland as symbolized in its parliament and its military arrangements had never been effectively independent. If there was a serious intention to reconcile Catholics to the house of Hanover by means of a union which dissolved the intransigent Protestant element so active in the Dublin parliament, then the immediate abandonment of such an intention in 1801 sabotaged the primary base upon which a union of palpable social import might have been achieved. Yet, bearing these unsatisfactory propositions in mind, we can see that the romantic ideology of wholeness and union is enacted in the very incompleteness of the union. Leaving aside the absence of parity between the elements officially joined in the Act of Union (as they were open to observation in the preceding century), and passing over the immediate question of motivation or intention, we find that the administration of Ireland after 1801 was characterized both by newly created ‘union’ features—the united parliament, the united Established Church, and so forth—and by the survival of pre-union features, the Lord-Lieutenancy, the legal system, etc. Oliver MacDonagh has described these arrangements as producing ‘a curious dualism in Irish government, the effects of which were hardly understood, still less allowed for, in the nineteenth century’. The Scottish union had preserved to Scotland a popular Church and a distinctive legal system; the Irish union perpetuated into an age of increasingly democratic feeling a minority Establishment and a professional elite in which sectarian pride took consolation. If all this seems momentarily remote from a discussion of Burke’s Reflections, let us recall that the French Revolution was undoubtedly the active occasion of all Anglo-Irish discussions from 1790 onwards, and that one little platoon to which Burke might have had to advise loyalty was the ‘Junto of jobbers’, soon to announce itself as ‘the Protestant Ascendancy’.
Burke's dual concentration on the violent pretensions of the ascendancy party in Ireland and the innovations of the Jacobins in France is itself an example of the fragmentation of the argument for a comprehensive view of things. Protestant Ascendancy is unable to see that Catholics are valuable allies in the counter-revolutionary struggle; Whigs like Fox are unable to see that they are the imminent victims of the revolution they espouse. Burke employs the revolution as a metaphor ironically imposed upon the ascendancy jobbers, and the Jacobins are cast in the role of ultra-Protestants, but the employment of metaphor both draws together and distinguishes the objects cited. From the outset the Reflections was acknowledged as possessing an intimate conjunction of style and content, as being in effect a literary work. But to say this is not simply to establish an unproblematic virtue in the book. James Boulton argues that 'Burke's veneration for stability, dignity, and a cultural tradition is transmitted through the image of the noble country-house or castle.'

Success in conveying this to the reader depends not solely on the rigour of the argument or the aptness of the tropes, but on the reader's prior assent to the identification of dignity with country houses. To say that style and content in the Reflections are at one is to mark the limitations of the book's potential as well as to measure its drawing of aesthetics and politics into harmony. Once again, the inherent division within the vision of a longed-for wholeness is acknowledged. The apostrophe to the queen in its absence of detail recalls Burke's own judgement in the Enquiry (1756) that readers of Homer are impressed by Priam's account of Helen for the very reasons that he does not specify (and so limit) her beauty; the Burkean evocation of a latter-day reine fatale is similar:

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy. Oh! What a revolution! and what an heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! ...

Surely the most effective analysis of this passage is William Blake's verse paraphrase:
The Queen of France just touched this globe,
And the pestilence darted from her robe;
But our good queen quite grows to the ground,
And a great many suckers grow all around.\(^{24}\)

The central metaphor (of elevation) is maintained but, by being stripped of its sonorous repetitions and cast in brutal doggerel, is shown to reveal callous remoteness. Beyond this, of course, the crucial difference between Blake and Burke is that Blake moves to concentrate on the actuality of a present-tense scene in which meaning is a potential to be drawn out by stylistic emphasis, whereas Burke insinuates a second object of consideration into his evocation of the queen—the effects of time doubly upon her and upon his altered sentiments towards her. If we read elsewhere in the Reflections that society becomes ‘a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’,\(^{25}\) this ‘eternal contract’ is in keeping with the mediation of time between the object and subject (so to speak) of the Reflections.

Incompleteness, sentiment, the passage of time—the dominant metaphor which draws these concerns together in Burke is ruination:

one of the first and most leading principles on which the common-world and the laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it amongst their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole fabric of their society; hazarding to leave to those who come after them a ruin instead of an habitation ....\(^{26}\)

Addressing his young French gentleman, Burke directs the same metaphor towards the same conclusion:
Your constitution, it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation; but you possessed in some parts the walls, and in all the foundations of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations.  

As James Boulton points out, this use of the great house as an image of the state or of society has a distinguished ancestry including Ben Jonson, Marvell, and Pope. The flourishing house of Jonson’s ‘To Penshurst’ is a model of an orderly society, with the active bountiful garden contributing emblems of human generosity and so forth. In Burke, by way of contrast, the house spatially occupies a large place in his imagery, even when the house itself is ruined or damaged.  

Continuity, expressed through legal concepts such as entail or prescription, is to be preferred to temporary well-being. The ruin is a characteristic romantic metaphor in that a form of incompleteness is reconciled to a form of wholeness, incompleteness of physical space assimilated to the evidence of wholeness in time. No doubt Gothic and antiquarian enthusiasms contribute to the romantic interest in ruins, but the evidence of the fragmentary text (e.g. ‘Kubla Khan’, ‘The Prelude’, etc.) and of the poets' sense of their own lives as ruins amid ruins confirms the centrality of the romantic metaphor.  

The legislatures of Britain and France are contrasted implicitly through this imagery. The National Assembly is treated simply as that—an assembly of persons speaking as the nation; the English parliament, however, can be referred to as ‘the two houses’, and the sense of a house as a social entity with its continuous life sanctions the decisions of parliament.  

Speaking of British liberty, Burke insists that ‘it has its gallery of portraits’, and the architectural metaphor is significant for its insinuation of the ancestral and generational human material of portraiture as displayed in galleries of a great house.  

This device of employing the static architectural metaphor in order to introduce a covert implication of a (quasi-)dynamic history has other related applications; having emphasized ‘grounds of hope and fear ... a solid ground on which any parent could speculate …’, Burke draws his paragraph up to an explicit topographical trope in which Jacobin individualism is identified with the process of architectural ruination:
Barbarism with regard to science and literature, unskilfulness with regard to arts and manufactures, would infallibly succeed to the want of a steady education and settled principle; and thus the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.\(^{30}\)

‘Disconnected into the dust’ enacts its sense in the very tenuousness of its verbal structure, and this harmony of style and content mocks ironically at the ruination of the commonwealth. The young Georg Lukacs launched his *Theory of the Novel* (1914–15) from an intense longing for Greek completeness, and declared that ‘irony is a negative mysticism to be found in times without a god’; recalling the affinities between the *Reflections* and the emergent form of the historical novel, we note also that, in such circumstances, ‘irony is the objectivity of the novel.’\(^{31}\)

If the great house is a dominant metaphor of the *Reflections*, with the attendant imagery of gardens and grounds and picture-galleries, its recurrent citation is ironic and objective in that Burke uses it primarily as an image of ruination contrasted with a wholeness which historical community may afford:

Is it then true, that the French government was such as to be incapable or undeserving of reform; so that it was of absolute necessity the whole fabric should be at once pulled down, and the area cleared for the erection of a theoretic experimental edifice in its place?\(^{32}\)

Or again,

The French builders, clearing away as mere rubbish what ever they found, and, like their ornamental gardeners, forming every thing into an exact level, propose to rest the whole local and general legislature on three bases of three different kinds ...\(^{33}\)

This use of the ‘great good place’ in contexts where ruination or damage is taking place is one form of paradox which Burke employs; perhaps the most striking instance of it is the single sentence which begins and ends with reversal and oxymoron:
The fresh ruins of France, which shock our feelings wherever we can turn our eyes, are not the devastation of civil war; they are the sad but instructive monuments of rash and ignorant counsel in time of profound peace.\(^{34}\) (Emphasis added)

(p.34) Reflections on the Revolution in France is not so much an Augustan account, or refutation, of the political philosophy and practice of Jacobinism as it is a literary enactment of fundamentally romantic assumptions. In the context of Anglo-Irish literature it is worth noting how its treatment of history occasionally anticipates the devices of the historical novel, and how its sense of history involves the collaboration of a metaphysic of eternity with the psychology of recollection. Metaphor, by means of a related subjectivity, is recurrently ironic. Many of these features of the Reflections are echoed in the subsequent sporadic writings on Protestant Ascendancy. The degree of public attention which Ireland earned in the 1790s—and especially from 1798 onwards—ensured that the new romantic mode of expression came to be applied to its political affairs. With the exception of Keats, all the great romantic writers concerned themselves with Irish affairs. One background to this romantic interest in Ireland could be summarized in William Blake’s friendship with James Barry, another in Shelley’s support for Catholic Emancipation. The first of these links the argument to that band of Irish adventurers—Burke himself, Goldsmith, Sheridan, and so on—who left home to make their way in the larger arena of London and whom Yeats subsequently and selectively declared to be part of an Irish Augustan tradition; the second touches upon one major theme in the nineteenth-century liberal concern with Irish vicissitudes.
This development is part of a broader alteration of relations between Britain and Ireland in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. No magical quality resides in the precise date of 1800 or 1801, though the Union clearly marks one major element in this alteration. Using it as an indicator of change, we see that the nominal independence of the pre-Union parliament in Dublin (and, less obviously, of the pre-Union kingdom of Ireland) is absorbed into a united parliament and a united kingdom. We see also, however, that this Union was built on powerful contradictions and dislocations. One index of this contradiction lies in the reports of travellers—whether from Britain or the Continent—who visited Ireland in the late eighteenth century or the early decades of the nineteenth century. No generalized conclusions on this topic could be attempted here, but one or two isolated elements may be briefly noted. In the 1790s, for example, when Ireland was nominally independent, its political affairs were seen as far more thoroughly interwoven with those of Britain than was the case for long periods in the nineteenth century when the official relationship between the islands was one of Union.

In June 1794, William Wordsworth wrote to the bookseller Mathews in London about a projected dissident journal:

I entirely approve of what you say on the subject of Ireland, and think it very proper that an agent should be appointed in Dublin to disseminate the impression. It would be well if either of you have any friends there, to whom you could write soliciting their recommendation. Indeed it would be very desirable to endeavour to have, in each considerable town of Great Britain and Ireland, a person to introduce the publication into notice ... If you think that by going over to Dublin I could transact any business relative to the publication in a better manner than it could be done by Letter, though I have no friends there I would willingly undertake the voyage, which may be done at any time from this place.35
Wordsworth did not make this proposed trip to Ireland, and indeed his encounter with the island did not occur until September 1829, when he stayed with Maria Edgeworth in the course of a five-week tour. Much had changed between 1794 and 1829—Wordsworth's own political attitudes, the events of 1798 which included *Lyrical Ballads* and the United Irishmen rebellion, Union, the growth of reaction in Britain during the Napoleonic wars, frustration in Ireland at delay in the emancipation of Catholics, an agricultural slump, two Irish Tory prime ministers of the United Kingdom (George Canning and the Duke of Wellington), the rise of Daniel O'Connell.

Neither these developments nor the postponement of his own visit prevented Wordsworth from propounding his views on Ireland in the intervening years. It is a measure of the extent to which Ireland was becoming a topic upon which Englishmen spoke confidently that the contradictions of Union did not inhibit such assertions. The terminology of these assertions is, however, explicitly revealing of the romantic base of this ideological confidence. In the case of Wordsworth, two instances may be significantly related.

Writing to Henry Crabbe Robinson in July 1826, the poet apologized for once again having to abandon plans to visit Ireland. He was, on the other hand, happy to provide advice to intending travellers:

> Of Ireland I can say nothing but that every body sees Killarney there are some fine ruins of monasteries, etc not far from Limerick the Vale of the Dargle and the Wicklow Mountains would lie in your way from Killarney to Dublin supposing you to start from Dublin you would go by Limerick and return by the Wicklow country but to one who should leave Wales out the best way of seeing Ireland from London would be to go from London to Bristol and thence to Cork Killarney and Dublin and the Giants Causeway. From Belfast there will no doubt be a Steam Boat to Glasgow ...
Given that this paragraph is written in his daughter's hand at Wordsworth's dictation, perhaps the breathless lack of punctuation should not be attributed to the poet himself. There is none the less a comprehensive confidence that Ireland is a romantic itinerary, a succession of picturesque scenes with priority given to ruined monasteries. It was just the previous year which had brought Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott to Killarney for the first time, and the comparison between Maria Edgeworth's attitude to scenery in literature and that evinced by Scott and Wordsworth illustrates the extent to which she retained pre-romantic attitudes generally. This distinction between the romantics' delight in Irish scenery, and the Irish novelist's willingness to rely on handbooks for what descriptions of landscape her novels required, has another dimension. Wordsworth and Scott are primarily looking at a foreign landscape, from which the continuous buzz of mundane social activity—boats, hotels, the state of dress of the people—has been filtered. We note the irony of this Irish foreignness in the attitude of two British romantics whose devotion to the institutions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was without rival. But we add to it a more intensely romantic counter-proposition—that the foreignness of Ireland is related to its pastness, its emblematic depiction in ruination. The ruin, in romantic poetry from Wordsworth's Grasmere to Holderlin's Patmos, is a metaphor uniting incompleteness and completeness, the fragmentation of human domicile and the continuity of memorized landscape. The 'Gothick ruin' of a Wicklow villa garden, which Maria Edgeworth focuses upon in *The Absentee*, is for her a superficial imitation of metaphor, romantic longing reduced to sentimental fabrication.

Maria Edgeworth's travels in France in 1820 offer an illuminating comparison to Wordsworthian Ireland. As always, she is concerned to relate the familiar and the unfamiliar; but in comparing French and Irish social occasions she unwittingly reveals her own tendency to identify the foreign and the romantic:
In the evening we were at a *fête de village* at La Celle, to which Mme de Vinde had invited us, as like an Irish *pattern* as possible, allowing for the difference of dress and manner. The scene was in a beautiful grove on each side of a romantic road leading through a valley. High wooded banks: groups of gaily-dressed village belles and beaux seen through the trees, in a quarry, in the sand-holes, everywhere where there was space enough to form a quadrille. This grove was planted by Gabrielle d'Estrees for whom Henry IV built a lodge near it. Fanny and Harriet danced with two gentlemen who were of our party, and they all danced on till dew-fall, when the lamps, little glasses full of oil and a wick suspended to the branches of the trees were lighted, and we returned to La Celle, where we ate ice and sat in a circle, playing *trouve mon ami*—mighty like ‘why, when, and where’—and then played loto till twelve. Rose at six, had coffee, and drove back to Paris in the cool of the delicious morning.38

The most pertinent comment on this passage is that provided by the editor of Maria Edgeworth's correspondence, in a footnote—'Mme. de Genlis ... speaks of the post-Revolution (p. 38) changes in *fêtes champêtres*; the gentry no longer danced with the lower classes and their gardens were opened to *cabaretiers* and *traiteurs* etc.'39 Maria Edgeworth, the foreigner in La Celle, sees a veritable vision of social harmony, dancers in the quarry, Marvellian lamps in the trees; the disenchanted memorialist sees the hired caterer, class tension, 'la morgue des dames de châteaux, qui, dans ces rejouissances, ne vouloient point danser avec les paysans'.40 This observation of bourgeois encroachment on previous complex distinctions and interactions relies of course on celebration of a past which is less than fully real; as Madame de Genlis expresses it, she works 'pour reparer le temps perdu'.41 Yet, to the Irish visitor, the evidence of latter-day decline has its own timeless charm.
Wordsworth on Irish landscape and Irish ruination constituted the first instance of the romantic ideology lying behind the confident assertions of English opinion on the subject of Ireland. The second illustrates the extent to which the sectarian tensions excited in the 1790s gave birth to a sociology which continues to colour political debate in Ireland. That Wordsworth’s views changed drastically between 1794 and the 1820s is well known, but that fact should not deter us from seeing in the change (and its specific continuities) a more than biographical significance. Writing to Sir Robert Inglis on 11 June 1825, he deplored George Canning’s speech on Catholic Relief ‘attempting to reconcile us to Papacy, by endeavours to prove that in points of Faith and practice, Protestantism stands pretty much upon a par with it’. If Canning seems to echo a broad inclusive theology, Wordsworth’s language follows closely strict formulations:

Were we to abandon the hope of gaining upon the Romanists, we must be prepared to admit the evil of their gaining upon us. Protestant Ascendancy must be renounced, and sooner or later will be substituted Catholic domination—the two religions cannot coexist, in a Country (p.39) free as our’s upon equal terms. For my own part while I condemn as founded in ignorance, I reprobate as of the most injurious tendency, every Measure that does not point to the maintenance of Protestant ascendancy, and to the diffusion of Protestant principles: and this doctrine I hold not more as a friend to Great Britain, than to Ireland.
Wordsworth (like Coleridge) came to hold views upon the sanctity of Church and State with which Edmund Burke, in so many ways their mentor, could not have sympathized. Yet the differentiation cannot be attributed simply to galloping reaction on the individual level. The Coleridgean notion of a ‘clerisy’, an intellectual class devoted to aims at once religious and cultural, may certainly be related to the desire of finding ‘a significant group’ upon whom the future of the nation could safely depend, but the conditions upon which such a proposition relied were not available in Burke’s lifetime. Burke’s practical experience as eighteenth century parliamentarian qualifies any romantic description of him. Yet here we find that the consistency of romanticism is what sceptics must regard as its inconsistency; the divergence of Wordsworth from Burke on the question of ‘the Protestant religion’ is a historical statement of their unanimity. This romantic contradiction informs much of the subsequent development of Anglo-Irish literature in the nineteenth century, and it is entirely in keeping with such dialectical procedures that Burke’s role, Burke’s significance, should be suppressed or denied by the ultimately crowning notion of an Augustan tradition. Successive stages, or seismic registers, of that development can be traced in the fiction of Maria Edgeworth, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Charles Lever; in the emergence of nineteenth-century Celticism; and climactically, in the polarized productions of Anglo-Irish modernism whose terms we can simply call Joyce and Yeats.
Reflections on the Revolution in France is not advanced here as a proto-novel upon which Maria Edgeworth subsequently models the real thing. As against such merely sequential notions of influence in literary history, a more dynamic alternative must be now developed which, while immersing itself in the actuality of history, also acknowledges (p.40) the full interaction of reader and text, subject and object. In this sense, consequently, we draw attention to certain novelistic features of the Reflections', but the Reflections, thus read, is as much influenced by Castle Rackrent, the Act of Union, and Yeats's Collected Poems as they are influenced by it. To see an unbridgeable distance between the France Burke lamented in the Reflections and the Irish Protestant jobbers he mocked in his letters is to travesty their historical and ideological setting. In the words of Thomas McFarland, the modalities of romanticism are fragmentation and longing, ruination and wholeness: the completely romantic poem is, like those magna opera upon which Wordsworth and Coleridge so long laboured, incomplete. Among Edmund Burke's writings it may appear futile to search for such a paradigm of the romantic metaphysic—once again the practical demands of a public career would appear to discourage that kind of imitative form. Nevertheless, if we have yet to look at the particular political circumstances in which Burke's letter to his son, Richard, was written—between mid-February and 10 May 1792, in the weeks running up to the publication of a Collected Works— we can still take a full measure of Letter to Richard Burke.
The letter is indeed unfinished, and was most ostentatiously
published as an unfinished text. Bibliographical facsimulation
could confirm instantly that the text ‘ends’ in a series of
asterisks, but what is considerably more significant is the fact
that, in the five years remaining to him, Burke did not attempt
to replace those asterisks. Admittedly, his most dearly beloved
son—no biographer can hope to convey the devastation
Richard Burke's death in 1794 wreaked upon Burke—was dead
within a poignantly shorter time. In turn, this totally
unexpected bereavement lends a special poignancy to the
‘final’ paragraph of Letter to Richard Burke: ‘AH titles
terminate in prescription; in which (differently from Time in
the fabulous instances) the son devours the father, and the last
prescription eats up all the former.’ We shall read the Letter
thoroughly for its scathing analysis of Protestant Ascendancy
—‘A word has been lately struck in the (p.41) mint of the
Castle of Dublin.’ The fiscal metaphor, the exploitation of
commercial idiom, is not limited to the letter to his son, but is
repeatedly employed in the Reflections where the financial
system of the Republic is condemned for its ‘continual
transmutation of paper into land, and land into paper’:

By this means the spirit of money-jobbing and
speculation goes in to the mass of the land itself, and
incorporates with it. By this kind of operation, that
species of property becomes (as it were) volatized; it
assumes an unnatural and monstrous activity ...,45

Of course, finance is a central concern of Burke's in his
polemic against republican France, and his use of fiscal
metaphor is apt: it counterbalances in its aptness the irony of
his great-house images of contemporary ruination. In Letter
to Richard Burke, the coinage ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ is
ferociously analysed precisely because Burke is aware of the
dangers of its currency. In other words, his account of
Protestant Ascendancy is closer to his ironic use of the great
house than to the analysis of republican finance.
Burke’s account of Protestant Ascendancy, therefore, is intimately related to his writings on France, and indeed Letter to Richard Burke incorporates both formal and tonal aspects of his romanticism. Its concluding image of prescription, as the son devouring the father, reverses the classical notion of time (Cronus) swallowing up its children. And this introduces a motif which will persist in Anglo-Irish literature from Castle Rackrent to ‘Purgatory’: that is, the symbiosis of Oedipal conflict and social mesalliance. In the former, blood relationship is both under-and over-valued. In the latter, class is at once stridently invoked and travestied.

As we approach the modernist period a third element becomes more prominent—a metaformal self-consciousness in the work of art by which it expresses its revolt against the author, its Oedipal assault upon its own creator. That such themes originate in the romantic period can be confirmed by reference to areas of literary production other than Ireland.

Burke’s condemnation of the volatility, the monstrous activity of the Revolution is a muted expression of a drastically new element in human consciousness, recognized by the German poet Novalis:

Most observers of the Revolution, especially the clever and fashionable ones, have declared it to be a dangerous and contagious disease. They have gone no further than the symptoms, and have interpreted these as being in many ways haphazardly confused. Many have regarded it as a merely local evil, but the most inspired opponents have urged castration for they have noticed that this alleged illness is nothing other than the crisis of imminent puberty.46

If the Revolution is the onset of adult sexuality, and its repression drastically symbolized by castration, then the persistence in Anglo-Irish literature of various forms of sexual redirection in covert guise—incest, homosexuality, the anti-Oedipal violence of fathers upon sons—signal larger colloisations of cultural, political, and economic interest. Such a vocabulary does not miraculously begin ex nihilo with the romantic age, but has its earlier, simpler (and ultimately redundant) manifestation in the Augustan antitheses of the eighteenth century.

Notes:

(2) Although it is not primarily concerned with the Reflections, Chris Reid’s article ‘Language and Practice in Burke's Political Writing’, Literature and History, vol. 6, (Autumn 1977), pp. 203–8, has been most helpful in developing this discussion.


(5) For the role of these terms in the fifteen innovatory chapter headings introduced by our recent American editor, see Appendix A.


(7) Reflections, p. 119.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid., p. 195; some of his strictly fallacious arguments invoking ‘law’ are discussed by Herbert J. Muller in The Uses of the Past: Profiles of Former Societies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 316 etc.


(13) Reflections, p. 120.
(14) Ibid.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.

(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid.


(21) See below, pp. 87 ff., for Burke's use of these phrases.


(26) Ibid.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid.


Ibid.

The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, pp. 126, 128.

George Canning was of course born in London, but, to adapt Wellington's comment on such matters, to be born in a stable does not entail one's being a horse. Canning's family came from Garvagh in County Derry.


Ibid.


Ibid.

The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth; The Later Years, Part i., 359.

Ibid.


Reflections, p. 308.

Novalis, loc. cit.