The Absentee

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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter aims to place Maria Edgeworth's novel in a broader historical context and to illustrate that these extended boundaries permit viewing the novel as an active agent in an imaginative debate of lasting significance. This chapter focuses on the novel *The Absentee* and its implied meaning and relationship to the status of Catholics and the significance of the past, in the light of contemporary anti-revolutionary liberalism.

*Keywords:* The Absentee, Maria Edgeworth, Edgeworth, anti-revolutionary liberalism, liberalism

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but it is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted.

(Hans-Georg Gadamer)
The Act of Union, coinciding with the publication of *Castle Rackrent*, lends an air of spurious neatness to Irish literary history. As we have seen, the composition of the novel had begun years before the Union became a lively issue and before the Edgeworths were involved in the parliamentary manoeuvres which culminated in the Union. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of round numbers and tidy coincidences has directed inquiries away from the genesis of *Castle Rackrent* into the context of its public appearance. This bias not only ignores the origins of the novel but also seriously distorts the relationship between text and context by emphasizing a highly immediate notion of context. Both in chronological and geographical terms the stress on immediacy can obscure the wider context—of European as well as British experience, of the eighteenth century as well as the year 1800—in which Maria Edgeworth worked. At the heart of the matter there is the problem (never easily resolved) as to when the past ends and the present begins. The question is best tackled by a challenge to the assumption that past and present are categorically distinct, or that (like links in a chain) they are comparable but separate in themselves. To take a more dynamic range of terms, history is not confined to the past: the historical perspective is a manner of interpretation which may legitimately include contemporary experience. It is therefore advisable to keep this flexible or expanding context before us as we read Maria Edgeworth's fiction.

It would be relatively easy to outline an immediate context for *The Absentee*, to sketch the relevant events of 1811–12, (p. 124) and of Maria Edgeworth's personal experience during this period. Indeed some such outline is unavoidable. But the over-all objective of the present chapter is to place the novel in its broader historical context and to illustrate that these extended boundaries permit us to see the fiction as an active agent in an imaginative debate of lasting significance. We may begin, however, with local matters.
The Act of Union had been passed amid promises of emancipation for Catholics; these promises were not kept. At first Catholic spokesmen were inclined towards a waiting game. The Prince Regent seemed friendly, and his accession could not be long delayed; the governments of Portland, Perceval, and Liverpool were so determinedly anti-emancipationist that petitions were better postponed for a happier day. But as early as 1804 leading Irish Catholics had met to organize their efforts to secure release from the Penal code. The composition of this first lobby reveals a social division which was to have important repercussions both in politics and literature: on the one hand there were representatives of the surviving Catholic gentry and nobility (Lord Fingall, Sir Thomas French, and the wealthy landowner, Elias Corbally), and on the other hand merchants and professional men such as Denys Scully, James Ryan, and Randall McDonnell. (To the tuned ear Irish surnames ring with social and denominational overtones, a circumstance which Maria Edgeworth happily exploits.) Others who assisted in these councils were John Keogh (a veteran of the previous century) and Lords Kenmare and Trimleston. The prominence of the titled members, and the influence of the merchants, marked the poles of a transformation of the Catholic question from a matter of eighteenth-century petitioning to full-blooded machine politics: Daniel O'Connell was soon to throw his abilities behind the younger and more aggressive faction. It is, however, worth noting that the conflict between nobleman and merchant, between style and substance, is present in The Absentee in the figures of Count O'Halloran and Mrs Raffarty, figures whom we will find to be instinct with historical nuances.
By the second decade of the century, the Catholic question had attracted the attention of English liberals and radicals, including Shelley and Byron. By February 1812 O'Connell was virtually the leader of the movement for emancipation, and though Lord Trimleston and one or two others were yet to retain some prestige among the Catholics the struggle had decisively gone against the noble party. At a meeting in Dublin on 28 February, O'Connell was the principal speaker, but Shelley was one of the few non-Catholic participants. In the Dublin Evening Post's account of his speech, there is an allusion which bears on an aspect of The Absentee's symbolism; referring to the conversion of the old parliament house into a bank, he declared that 'he saw the *fane of liberty converted into a temple of Mammon.* (Loud applause'). Shelley as a good (certainly an earnest) revolutionary saw Catholic emancipation only as a tactical necessity beyond which national freedom became a possibility: his tribute to the corrupt Irish parliament as a 'fane of liberty' must be taken as a gesture towards that sentimentalizing of the past which characterized Irish politics after 1800. Had Shelley lived to 1829 he would have been dismayed to note that O'Connell accepted emancipation on terms which placed the temple of Mammon before the rights of the cabin-dweller. His 1812 speech—together with the *Address to the Irish People*—economically makes one vital point, that the local and temporary cannot be absolutely distinguished from the wider context of British and European culture. More particularly, if the loud applause of Messrs Scully, Ryan, and McDonnell (or their equivalents) for Shelley's attack on Mammon indicates the unresolved state of Catholic opinion on the relationship between class and denomination—the Dublin banking fraternity was of course overwhelmingly Protestant—it also suggests that those with views diametrically opposed to Shelley's might also favour emancipation. It is in this light that we approach The Absentee's discussion of the status of Catholics and the significance of the past, in the light of contemporary anti-revolutionary liberalism. The background to Shelley's presence in Dublin, as to Maria Edgeworth's novel, is of course the war against Napoleon, and the British government's need to placate Papist opinion at home in furtherance of the war effort.
A more detailed account of the events of 1812 is entirely feasible—the ‘great series of county meetings’ in favour of unconditional emancipation in the summer months, which gave promise of the mass-politics of the 1820s. But fiction deals with the particular as a manifestation of the typical, and Maria Edgeworth's imagination was primarily historical. Of Shelley's existence in 1812 she was most likely happily ignorant. Nevertheless, as our account of *The Absentee* will concern itself with the precise historical associations of certain names and places (O'Halloran, Trimleston, Tusculum, O'Raffarty) there is something to be gained by looking briefly at some of Shelley's Irish contacts. John Philpot Curran he met, and William Hamilton Rowan he failed to meet: they had fallen away from their radicalism. Roger and Arthur O'Connor he approved of whole-heartedly, and with John Lawless (O'Connell's left-tenant) he planned to run a newspaper. However, both Percy and Harriet Shelley were particularly impressed by a veteran of the 1798 rebellion, Catherine Nugent. Without suggesting the slightest debt on Maria Edgeworth's part to this energetic woman, we should remark a similarity between her and Grace Nugent, the heroine of *The Absentee*—both depended upon others for their subsistence despite an evident superiority of mind (and perhaps of breeding). Harriet Shelley wrote of the actual Catherine Nugent:

This excellent woman, with all her notions of Philanthropy and Justice, is obliged to work for her subsistence—to work in a shop which is a furrier's; there she is every day confined to her needle. Is it not a thousand pities that such a woman should be so dependent upon others?™
The point here is certainly not that Maria Edgeworth drew upon this friend of the 1798 prisoners, Shelley's political (p.127) associate in 1812. Instead we should note in Harriet's letter that tone of surprise at Miss Nugent's low estate; indeed it is the combination of inherited or innate dignity and circumstantial dependence which unites Catherine Nugent and 'Grace Nugent'. That the name Nugent carried very particular connotations is a proposition which awaits proof: that the collocation of Jacobin and Jacobite loyalties (i.e. contemporary and revolutionary with historical and reactionary) is possible in The Absentee is a further demonstration of the unsettled attitude to ‘Mammon’ evident in Shelley's reception by the Catholic delegates in February 1812. We approach The Absentee therefore informed of the restless and ambiguous state of opinion not only in Ireland but throughout Britain.

1. Methods, not Sources

The Absentee is a tale of contemporary events. There are three moments in the fiction on which some light might be cast, three significant allusions which are in danger of neglect, being less than self-evident to the modern reader. This is not to supply sources which demonstrate how Maria Edgeworth wrote her tale, but rather to show how the public would have read it in 1812. She did not expect her readers to recognize originals for her details; instead her method facilitated general associations in the reader's mind. The first hidden moment illustrates the point quite economically.
A pamphlet, *An Intercepted Letter from China*, is recommended to Lord Colambre, the returning absentee, as a reliable account of social life in Dublin. This clearly is a late reference to the fashion of satire through pseudo-oriental travellers' reports, a fashion now recalled principally in the case of Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762). But in *The Absentee* the pamphlet's satirical nature is played down; it features as part of the evidence, which Sir James Brooke presents to Lord Colambre, of the amelioration of Dublin society since the immediate post-Union years. Though suspiciously little description of the city itself is provided, and its citizens make no direct intervention into the narrative, one might see this discrepancy between Brooke's (p.128) avowed aims and the implications of the pamphlet's title as merely the result of Maria Edgeworth's ignorance of 'oriental' satire. But the Edgeworth style was vigorously rational, practical, and literate; footnotes abound in the fiction generally, and *Ennui* explicitly draws on a travel-book. In *The Absentee* every other item on Lord Colambre's reading list is authentic and exemplary—works by Edmund Spenser, Sir John Davies, Arthur Young, and D. A. Beaufort. In the circumstances, it would be obtuse to doubt the seriousness of Maria Edgeworth's citing the *Intercepted Letter*. Moreover, there is much evidence to identify the pamphlet with an actual satire, *An Intercepted Letter from J- T- Esq.; Writer at Canton, to his Friend in Dublin, Ireland*, published in Dublin in 1804, evidence in the form of shared social views, incidents, and analyses in the actual pamphlet and *The Absentee*. The 1804 publication was anonymous, but it has been long attributed to John Wilson Croker. In *The Absentee* Sir James Brooke speaks of the pamphlet's 'slight, playful and ironical style', a description which does not accord with Croker's heavy-handed satire. In fact, the Irish capital as seen by readers of the tale more closely resembles Croker's satire than the effusive ambiguities with which the characters discuss *An Intercepted Letter* and its analysis. The tale provides in now submerged details such as an allusion to pseudo-oriental satire a more critical account of Dublin than that articulated by the characters.
Following the encounter with Sir James Brooke, Lord Colambre visits a villa called Tusculum near Bray, the property of Mrs Anastasia Raffarty. The hospitality he receives there constitutes the second impressive incident of his sojourn in Dublin and its environs. Mrs Raffarty, delighted to include a noble lord in her lunch party, puts on a show of parvenu vulgarity, a mercenary appreciation of art, a grotesque taste in landscaping, and a ridiculous pretension to relaxed opulence. *The Absentee* is here quite unambiguous:

The dinner had two great faults—profusion and pretension. There was, in fact, ten times more on the table than was necessary; and the (p.129) entertainment was far above the circumstances of the person by whom it was given: for instance, the dish of fish at the head of the table had been brought across the island from Sligo, and had cost five guineas; as the lady of the house failed not to make known. But, after all, things were not of a piece; there was a disparity between the entertainment and the attendants; there was no proportion or fitness of things; a painful endeavour at what could not be attained, and a toiling in vain to conceal and repair deficiencies and blunders.\(^8\)

The gardens are in keeping with the interior; they contain:

- a little conservatory, and a little pinery, and a little grapery, and a little aviary, and a little pheasantry, and a little dairy for show, and a little cottage for ditto, with a grotto full of shells, and a little hermitage full of earwigs, and a little ruin full of looking-glass, ‘to enlarge and multiply the effect of the Gothic’.\(^9\)

This intrusiveness and inversion of nature is neatly dramatized when a stuffed ornamental fisherman on a Chinese bridge is pulled into the water by a living fish.
Unlike the encounter with Sir James Brooke, this scene can offer Lord Colambre no ambiguous reason for settling in his native land. The Raffartys, however, cannot have the effect of sending him hot-foot back to London, for they speak with a voice disturbingly similar to that of his parents, Lord and Lady Clonbrony. In narrative terms, the Tusculum scene brings the hero to a halt; it forces him to consider his surroundings and his domestic background, to relate Irish and English experience. But a continuity exists between this episode and earlier and later developments. Though he admitted that immediately after the Union vulgarity flourished in the wake of the annihilated parliament, Sir James had assured Lord Colambre that now in Dublin:

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\text{you find a society \ldots composed of a most agreeable and salutary mixture of birth and education, gentility and knowledge, manner and matter; and you see pervading the whole new life and energy, new talent, new ambition, a desire and a determination to improve and be improved} \ldots
\] (p.130)

The trouble is that the reader sees none of this benign synthesis of the faculties and the classes; he sees instead Mrs Raffarty, a grocer's wife, living in a simulacrum of refined ease.

Croker's pamphlet in 1804 had described just this swift advance of the mercantile classes—it was a commonplace criticism of post-Union Dublin—but also added as a climactic symbol an account of the despoilment of the parliament house after the Union. (This is Shelley's fane of liberty \textit{cum} temple of Mammon.) The new owners of the building, the Bank of Ireland company, pulled down a magnificent colonnade, according to Croker who observed:

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\text{I thought at first that the money brokers expected the colonade to refund in the pulling down, the prodigious sums which had been expended in building, but I am informed that they have no such mercenary motives, and that this lamentable destruction is a pure effect of their taste.}^{11}
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Croker is being satirical of course, but the historian W. E. H. Lecky records details of the deliberate alteration of the old parliament, the two objectives being to render it unfit for use ever again as public debating chambers and to transform the people's image of it by ornamentalizing the exterior.\textsuperscript{12} The satirist, for his own purpose, blames taste; the historian reveals motivation. Between the two a contemporary commentator, John Carr, recorded his somewhat foolish opinion of the architectural meddling, If at first that elegant screen were improperly raised, the error of its situation has been increased, by the violation of its chaste and beautiful columns; if it were judiciously erected, it is now spoiled.\textsuperscript{13} Now Croker (whose satire is indirectly invoked elsewhere in \textit{The Absentee}) and Carr (whose Irish travels the Edgeworths, father and daughter had hostilely reviewed) both fix on the details of the columns or colonnade as an example of the tasteless improvement or ‘de-functionalizing’ of the old parliament house. In \textit{The Absentee}’s account of Mrs Raffarty's villa we learn only one feature of its architecture:

There had been a handsome portico in front of the house; but this interfering with the lady’s desire to have a viranda, which she said could not be dispensed with, she had raised the whole portico to the second story, where it stood, or seemed to stand, upon a tarpaulin roof. But Mrs. Raffarty explained, that the pillars, though they looked so properly substantial, were really hollow and as light as feathers, and were supported with cramps, without \textit{disobliging} the front wall of the house at all to signify.\textsuperscript{14}

Without thinking of the parliament as a source for Tusculum, we may see that details from Croker’s satire, though evidently neutralized in Sir James Brooke’s summary, are acknowledged and transformed in a later episode of \textit{The Absentee}. Nor does Maria Edgeworth allow the implication to remain inert, for in a late reference to the Raffartys she points out that the house passed to them ‘that time the parliament flitted’.\textsuperscript{15}
The view that the despoilment of the old parliament house is reflected in Mrs Raffarty's juggling with porticoes and cramps is made more plausible if we consider the manifestations of taste available to Maria Edgeworth in creating Tusculum. This is not to suggest an original for the ghastly hostess—apart from Lady Clonbrony. The location of her villa, however, is undoubtedly exact, and to contemporary readers reassuringly real. Tusculum is near the town of Bray, and evidently on the Wicklow side of the town. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the principal villa in this picturesque area was Bellevue, with a sizeable demesne straddling the hill between the Glen of the Downs and Delgany, the property of Mr and Mrs Peter La Touche. La Touche was one of Dublin's leading bankers; that is to say, of the profession who inherited and disfigured the old parliament house. Bellevue of course was not unique in the area, but travellers made a point of including it on their itinerary. Bellevue was special in several ways; it was open to the public (p.132) at certain times of the year, as a model of its mistress's ostentation and public spirit, being thus already regarded as representative of a type. When John Ferrar published his account of Dublin in 1796 he gave Bellevue prominence even on the title-page. Some of his detail is suggestive to readers of The Absentee—a conservatory 254 feet in length, a superb orangery, a peach-house, and a pinery. ‘The Gothic dining-room—which is extremely curious and seems like a rock—was added in the year 1788,’16 Two years after this account of Bellevue was published, insurrection broke out about fifteen miles further south, and travel in Wicklow became temporarily unfashionable.

In 1801 Robert Fraser published a General View of Wicklow in which he devoted five pages to Mrs La Touche's establishment, stressing that lady's munificence 'in this time of uncommon scarcity', and seemingly anxious to rebut any notion of Bellevue as pointless extravagance:
Here the barren mountain's side has been forced by its cultivation, to afford subsistence and comfort to thousands, and to present an example to men of rank and fortune, which, if universally followed would render Ireland the elysium of the world … The benevolent possessors do not content their feelings with even amply rewarding the labour of the peasants they employ. They attend even to the prevention of their wants, and the increase of their comforts. Every article of subsistence is procured for them … , 17

This tourist was in no danger of courting La Touche displeasure, though the attitude towards the peasantry (never an Edgeworthian term) was one which the practical Edgeworths could not have accepted. To Richard Lovell Edgeworth and (p.133) his daughter, the provision of prettified cottages and incongruous luxuries was likely only to confuse and distress the Irish tenant. They believed in inobtrusive adequacy, the reward of effort, but not the general improvement of conditions irrespective of individual deserts. In The Absentee this indiscriminate and sporadic passion for improvement is found at Kilpatrickstown:

Lord and Lady Kilpatrick, who had lived always for the fashionable world, had taken little pains to improve the condition of their tenants: the few attempts they had made were injudicious. They had built ornamented, picturesque cottages, within view of their p»ark; and favourite followers of the family, people with half a century's habit of indolence and dirt, were promoted to these fine dwellings. The consequences were … everything let to go to ruin for the want of a moment's care, or pulled to pieces for the sake of the most surreptitious profit: the people most assisted always appearing proportionally wretched and discontented. 18

But it was the egregious John Carr, in The Stranger in Ireland, whose account of Bellevue was in its enthusiasm for the useless and merely decorative most likely to infuriate the Edgeworths:
I believe in England and Ireland the green and hot-houses of Bellevue are unrivalled. This palace of glass, which looks as if it had been raised by Aladdin's lamp, is six hundred and fifty feet in length, and includes an orange, a peach, a cherry-house and a vinery, and is filled with the most precious and beautiful plants from the sultry regions of Asia, Africa and America, which, tastefully arranged and in the highest preservation, banquet the eye with their voluptuous perfume. As I was roving through the delicious spot, some steps led me into the chapel ... festooned with Egyptian drapery ... the seats are covered with scarlet cloth, the decorations are in the highest style of appropriate elegance, and the entrance opens into the conservatory.
For prose like this Carr was ridiculed by the Edgeworths in the *Edinburgh Review*, but the impression persisted with Maria Edgeworth to contribute to her image of Mrs Raffarty's emporium. Ferrar, Fraser, and Carr were all writing prior to *The Absentee*, but the reputation of Bellevue lived on for (p. 134) many years. G. N. Wright, for example, describes the ornamental cottage at the northern extremity of the demesne as containing ‘a number of apartments; one on the ground floor is appropriated to the purposes of a museum, and a second is used for a banqueting room, where Mrs. La Touche sometimes entertains her friends at luncheon.’ Close by, ‘a few cottagers reside, whose chief support is derived from supplying parties from Dublin with accommodations, either in their cottages or on the green turf before them, to enjoy their cold collation.’

Wright's *Guide to County Wicklow* offers a strangely muffled analysis of the local economy, for the area is ‘thickly inhabited by gentry’. Brewer is more frank, suggesting that the banqueting-house ‘might, perhaps, have been rendered more consonant to the unusual character of the surrounding circumstances’, and the modern plantations ‘might possibly, have been withheld to advantage in some places’. If Brewer admits the excessive interference with Nature over which Mrs La Touche presided, Wright records details which are equally significant for us—a stuffed panther, a collection of shells, a tottering wooden temple presumably full of earwigs. In *The Absentee* the excesses of Tusculum remind Lord Colambre of his mother's debased taste, her reception rooms in London being contrived to resemble a Turkish tent, a pagoda, and the Alhambra. According to Lewis's description of the actual estate at Bellevue, Mrs La Touche's shrines included a solid Turkish tent and an Octagon House.

Maria Edgeworth's method is not to copy Tusculum from Bellevue, but rather to build on the assumption that her readers will respond, not to a generalized idea of the fashionable villa, but rather to known and actual types. The general idea of the villa, therefore, is engendered in the reader's mind in the reading of *The Absentee*, and not in the tale itself. Tusculum is not extensive like Bellevue; it is compact, cramped (literally), and overcrowded; that is how Maria Edgeworth conveys the shape of Mrs Raffarty's imagination.
Similarly, Carr's mixed metaphors and obsequious journalese are not sources for *The Absentee*, at least not in any artistically important sense; the palace of glass raised by Aladdin's lamp may become an appropriate image of Mrs Raffarty's career, her imminent downfall, and her spurious eminence in society. But in another sense Tusculum is pervasive, because through a recognition of its relationship with—say—Bellevue, the reader of the fiction can see the Tusculum style at work both in the Clonbrony's London home and in the phoney Kilpatrick improvements. The Tusculum scene takes up only part of one chapter in the tale, and its essence is caught in the emblem-like stuffed fisherman dragged into the living stream. That image is not simply the author's irony; it prepares us for Mrs Raffarty's bankruptcy and the destruction of her brother, Nicholas Garraghty, whose regime as land-agent at Clonbrony Castle is a perversion of a political 'norm'. The relationship between Tusculum and Bellevue is a kind of dialectic—the precise location and concentrated emblems of the fictional villa suggest to the reader districts and villas he knows. Knowing more than the detail present at Tusculum, he proceeds to recognize the same style elsewhere in the tale, in London drawing rooms and deep rural cabins. For it is not by studying Tusculum itself that we see its relationship in *The Absentee* to London and Kilpatrickstown; it is rather in the implied social context of such typical effects. A distinction can be made between the reader of 1812 and the reader of today; the latter may come to regard Bellevue as a source for *The Absentee*, but the contemporary reader existed in a different consciousness. There is no equivalence between Bellevue and Tusculum; instead, in *The Absentee* a concrete typicality draws the reader's knowledge into action. But the full implications of the contemporary reader's view of Mrs Raffarty's villa can only be appreciated within a comprehensive account of the fiction as a whole. The relationship between Tusculum and Bellevue does not just illustrate a method of composition; it exemplifies an important theme in *The Absentee*, the transformation of knowledge into action.
The third moment in the tale which may be drawn into its proper focus has already been discussed in some detail by (p. 136) Thomas Flanagan in The Irish Novelists 1800–1850, the scene in which Lord Colambre visits the crumbling home of Count O’Halloran. Though this theatrical depiction abounds in what Flanagan calls allegorical meanings, the narrative does not stand still. The Count is an antiquarian, and in his library the returning absentee (as yet a mere sightseer) discovers memorials of the ancient Nugent family. Remaining on the narrative level, we can see that Colambre is drawn to these memorials because his attractive and witty cousin, Grace, is a Nugent. But his fellow visitors, English army officers for the most part, seize on no such guiding star, and so are lost amid the clutter of emblems which surround the Count—‘an odd assembly: an eagle, a goat, an otter, several gold and silver fish in a glass globe, and a white mouse in a cage’. These strange pets’ behaviour is described in terms reminiscent of heraldry—‘the eagle, quick of eye but quiet of demeanour, was perched upon his stand; the otter lay under the table, perfectly harmless; the Angora goat … was walking about the room …’.

The entrance of the strangers disturbs this careful composition, but the subsequent arrival of the Count sets all aright once more. When O’Halloran enters he immediately refers to his menagerie in a phrase which Lord Colambre courteously interrupts: “mouse, a bird, and a fish, are, you know, tribute from earth, air, and water, to a conqueror—” “But from no barbarous Scythian!” said Lord Colambre, smiling’. As the Count’s allusion to Herodotus is recognized and cancelled, Maria Edgeworth becomes more explicit metaphorically in describing the reconciliation between pets and visitors:

The count looked at lord Colambre, as at a person worthy his attention; but his first care was to keep the peace between his loving subjects and his foreign visitors. It was difficult to dislodge the old settlers, to make room for the new comers: but he adjusted these things with admirable (p.137) facility; and, with a master's hand and master's eye, compelled each favourite to retreat into the back settlements.
The terms of the metaphor are—each considered in isolation—innocuous; it is their accumulation which emphasizes a political context—‘to keep the peace’ between ‘loving subjects’ or ‘the old settlers’ and ‘foreign visitors’, and to ‘retreat into the back settlements’, etc. As self-styled Scythian, Count O’Halloran had referred to the emblems of homage, casting himself as the conquered, and Lord Colambre (by implication) as the conqueror. The absentee’s interruption, therefore, is much more than courteous; it indicates something of the terms on which he arrives back on his estates, and suggests that his contribution alters the historical role of the Count. Lest these implications be missed, there follows an incident in which the officers (or ‘foreign visitors’) before whom the master diplomat defers, mistakenly refer to him as mister. Given such emphatic signals, the reader cannot but reflect on O’Halloran’s status and the proper mode of address he commands; he is a retired soldier, bearer of a continental title. In the argot of eighteenth-century Jacobitism, he is a Wild Goose, one of those high-born followers of King James who sought military service with the Catholic monarchs of Europe. Flanagan goes no further in analysing this strange scene than to stress O’Halloran’s isolation in his homeland, his being the ‘survivor of a long-dead Ireland’.

Yet if the Count’s title proclaims his loyalties, his surname is no less informative. Count O’Halloran is surrounded by genealogies, funeral urns and the skeletons of extinct animals; one of the outstanding antiquarians of Maria Edgeworth’s age was Dr Sylvester O’Halloran. In The Essay on Irish Bulls (1802) Maria and her father had gently ridiculed the antiquarian movement, naming only O’Halloran as exemplar of the vocation. There are similarities, apart from the identical surname, to suggest that Dr O’Halloran contributed at least his name to the fictional Count O’Halloran—similarities of continental association, even of dress. But we have good authority—Edgeworth family tradition, in fact—to believe that another aspect of the Count was drawn from a different quarter. Probably at the suggestion of her relative D. A. Beaufort, whose Memoir to a Map of Ireland featured on Sir James Brooke’s reading list, Maria Edgeworth based the Count’s curious household of pets on that of the twelfth Baron Trimleston, Robert Barnewall. Trimleston had been a Catholic, of Jacobite sympathies, who had spent years in exile and had been coldly received on returning to Ireland. In 1762
he had organized a petition to the Lord-Lieutenant from notable Catholics, asking for a relaxation of the law forbidding them to bear arms, and specifically requesting permission to join the (Hanoverian) king’s service. At the instigation of the exclusively Protestant Irish parliament, this movement towards reconciliation was thwarted. However, Trimleston was long dead before Maria Edgeworth set foot in Ireland, and his presence in the tale is of secondary importance. Certain important associations and assumptions went into the creation of the synthesis which is Count O’Halloran. The exotic household is provided by family stories of an eccentric neighbour, but the animals are so disposed of in the prose as to become a heraldic tableau vivant rather than a grotesque extension of a personality. Baron Trimleston had practised medicine in France, and in searching for a name for her character Maria Edgeworth reviews the names of those who share this characteristic. One such is Sylvester O’Halloran, whom she has already mildly satirized. Trimleston and Barnewall do not appear as names in The Absentee, but that family had intermarried with another important Irish sept, the Nugents, whose name is borne by the heroine. It is not surprising therefore that Grace Nugent’s marriage to Lord Colambre is made possible by the Count’s intervention—antiquarianism brought up-to-date to serve the present. And in 1812 (when The Absentee was written) a renowned member of the Nugent family carried the title of Count of the Holy Roman Empire, thus completing the synthesis of the fictitious ‘Count O’Halloran’. These associations—the Jacobite with the antiquarian with the latter-day continental soldier—become more potent in the light of Sylvester O’Halloran’s attitude to the Act of Union. Maria Edgeworth’s synthesis draws together Jacobite and anti-Union feeling, and launches a myth of incalculable potency in modern Irish literature and politics.

2. The Heroine
Inevitably an inquiry into these allusions must focus attention on Irish references, but before reaching any conclusion about them, we should consider a further context in which *The Absentee* should be read— that of Maria Edgeworth's fellow novelists in Britain. As we shall see, the tale pays impatient attention to landscape and 'improvement', while *Mansfield Park* (1814) used the ill effects of a master's absence from the Great House to describe a wider moral concern. In *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott* Donald Davie compares Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen, an exercise in which the Irishwoman is by no means disgraced. For him, the common factor is not the theme of absenteeism, but the heroine's dilemma:

Miss Edgeworth's Grace Nugent is, like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, a ward and a dependent, but the Irish novelist doesn't penetrate this predicament as Miss Austen does, nor does she realise what a very advantageous station this was for the author, through her character, to inspect society from.32

(p.140) Characters and roles cannot be totally abstracted from a complex fictional world even for comparison with Fanny Price. Nevertheless, Davie's point is useful if it obliges us to show that Grace Nugent, within her own novel, is a fully integrated and articulate character. This has rarely been admitted by critics, and even Edgeworthians have expressed reservations about Grace's role. Marilyn Butler, in the definitive biography declares that:

the concluding section of *The Absentee* is almost exclusively taken up with disentangling a sub-plot about the good name of the heroine's mother. It is not relevant to the theme of absenteeism, and indeed can scarcely be made intelligible without reference to *Patronage*. As a whole, therefore, *The Absentee* is very uneven, and in its treatment of Ireland is by far the least successful of Maria Edgeworth's four Irish tales.33
The role of the heroine is clearly central, not only to the task of illuminating the curious household of Count O'Halloran, but to the success of the tale as an artistic unity. Although Grace Nugent is absent from the page for much of the action, she is unquestionably as important to the theme of the tale as the hero himself. Given the apparent simplicity of the plot as customarily summarized, and the strictures of Donald Davie and Marilyn Butler on the heroine's role, it may be revealing to construct our account of *The Absentee* round her.

We first see Grace Nugent in the Clonbrony's London home, attractive but somewhat cool to her suitors. She has no parents, no fortune; her chief assets are an intelligent insight into her guardians' pretension and folly, and a loyal sense of embarrassment on their behalf. The first allusion to her name arises from Lady Clonbrony's admission that she had tried to persuade Grace to drop 'Nugent', to disguise the *Iricism*. But Grace has evidently refused, perhaps because she has no other possession truly her own. A further consciousness of her name is amusingly conveyed when two guests at the Clonbrony gala attempt to discuss Grace's background without mentioning their victim:

*(p.141)* ‘Speak low, looking innocent all the while straight forward, or now and then up at the lamps—keep on in an even tone—use no names—and you may tell any thing.’

‘Well, then, when Miss Nugent first came to London, Mrs. Dareville—’

‘Two names already—did not I warn ye?’

‘But how can I make myself intelligible?’

‘Initials—can't you use—or genealogy?’

The exchange stresses, by its fractured syntax, the impossibility of telling anything without resorting to names. Indirectly it informs us that names may tell a great deal about characters.
And the name ‘Nugent’ carried particular associations in Anglo-Irish circles at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had carried them for several previous centuries. The Nugents had been among the first Norman families to settle in Ireland after the twelfth-century invasion. Together with Plunketts, Dillons, and Barnewalls, they dominated Norman-Irish society in the northern midlands. At the Reformation these families remained Catholic, and continued to play a prominent part in Irish affairs, being known as the ‘Old English’ to distinguish them from later, Protestant planters. At the close of the seventeenth century, they adhered to the Jacobite cause, and lost lands, titles, limbs, and lives in the service of King James. The county of Westmeath, which borders on Longford, was the centre of Nugent influence, and the degree of their Jacobite commitment can be gauged from outlawry statistics; of those outlawed for high treason committed in Ireland against King William, two hundred and sixty-eight had homes in Westmeath, and of these forty-seven (or 17.5 per cent) were Nugents; of those outlawed for treason committed abroad, Westmeath accounted for ninety-two, fifteen of them Nugents. As a result of these declarations many Irish Jacobites (and almost all of them Catholics) went into continental military service. At the battles of Ramillies, Oudenarde, and Malplaquet, a Christopher Nugent commanded a regiment which bore his name. He accompanied the self-styled James III to Scotland in 1715, a spontaneous act of Jacobite enthusiasm which led to disagreements with his French superiors. Nugent had married Bridget Barnewall, daughter of the ninth Baron Trimleston, another of whose daughters married another Irish Nugent.
Among a group for whom the possibilities of advancement were legally restricted, it is not surprising to find familiar patterns and habits emerging. A second Christopher Nugent (of the same Westmeath family) shared with the twelfth Baron Trimleston a French medical education, this later Nugent becoming in 1757 the father-in-law of Edmund Burke. Though he remained a strict and sociable Catholic, he was a member of Doctor Johnson's circle in London, and Johnson is said to have greeted news of Nugent's death with a sad apostrophe to their ritual Friday omelettes. By and large, the name Nugent implied an Irish, aristocratic, Jacobite background, though the defeat of King James had led to the demotion of the name in Irish society in the eighteenth century. All nineteen Nugents in the Dictionary of National Biography are connected with the Westmeath family, though not all were so pious or so loyal to tradition as Johnson's friend. For as the eighteenth century progressed, there were movements by both sides towards a reconciliation between some of the Jacobite exiles and the Hanoverian regime—which needed professional soldiers, and might stomach Popery in men of such reactionary political views. Trimleston's initiative of 1762 was of this kind. In a number of cases a rapprochement was achieved by an individual act of apostasy; Robert, the Earl Nugent (1702–88), was the family's most famous convert to the reformed religion and political success; his mother was Mary Barnewall. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, as the French Revolution overturned the alliances of a previous age, pressing reasons of state encouraged an understanding between the British government and the descendents of Jacobite traitors. In the Austrian service, Lavall, Count Nugent (1777–1862) combined a brilliant military campaign against Napoleon with diplomatic initiatives in London, initiatives which earned him the respect and confidence of Sir Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, a fellow-Irishman with Westmeath connections. Count Nugent was in London in 1811 and 1812, the months preceeding The Absentee's publication, in quest of an agreement with the regime which had banished his forefathers. Lady Wellesley being a friend of Maria Edgeworth's and a native of Westmeath, it is not unlikely that a report of the Count got through to Edgeworthstown. Even in Maria Edgeworth's childhood some forty years earlier, the name Nugent conjured up particular and embarrassing assumptions; an incident is recorded in a later letter between members of the Edgeworth family:
There was company one evening and tea and cakes of which Maria eat so much that being desired to buckle her shoe she could be no means stoop to reach her foot and looking for help she saw a Miss Nugent who having been playing on the fiddle her natural instinct taught her must be an underling—and called her to do it for her ...

A pointless reference, were it not for the fact that, in *The Absentee* Grace Nugent is a dependent in the household, and is finally accepted to the accompaniment of tune-players. And even before 1812, Maria Edgeworth had drawn on the status of the Nugent name to provide a typical incident in the career of Sir Murtagh Rackrent, who had been very sanguine about a lawsuit with the Nugents of Carrickashaughlin. O'Shaughlin having been originally the Rackrent family name, before Sir Patrick's apostasy, the lawsuit in *Castle Rackrent* encapsulated an entire century of political conflict. Names, as the nameless gossips of the London salons recognized, are everything in this fiction.

To the casual reader it is clear that Grace and her cousin are destined for a happy marriage. Grace's reluctance is generated by a distaste of placing herself in a position where she might appear as a gold-digger. The dominant topic of the opening chapters is advantageous marriage and the best means to achieve it. A Mrs Broadhurst insists that the young should be given opportunities to nurture affection on which their parents have already agreed; she advises 'Propinquity!—Propinquity!—as my father used to say—And he was married five times, and twice to heiresses.' Grace's delicacy of feeling on this point is implicated in her name; Goldsmith's friend, the Earl Nugent to whom *The Haunch of Venison* was presented, had won fame and fortune by marrying a succession of rich widows. Horace Walpole coined the verb 'to nugentise' to describe this mercantile attitude to marriage.

The opening chapters do not simply see the heroine sitting aside from the fashionable and trivial—as Fanny Price sits aside—but present Grace Nugent surrounded by a society dedicated to enacting before her the idiomatic meaning of her name. Her name is potentially a slight, on grounds of politics and ethics; being poor she must avoid the application of the name in the idiomatic sense. Consequently she must remain reserved towards her cousin, despite her feeling for him.
But Colambre is even more stubbornly resistant to the love-match. Through the scheming Lady Dashfort he learns that Grace's mother had been a St Omar, a family of whom none of the women was sans reproche.\textsuperscript{40} Repeatedly he muses on this disgrace, and repeatedly the name St Omar figures as a shorthand for the offence. St Omer, of course, was the French seminary at which a large proportion of Catholic priests were educated in the eighteenth century, when education was denied them at home. St Omar, in the context of 1812, is as obvious a reference as would Harvard be in a modern novel. Daniel O'Connell spent a brief period in the St Omer seminary, and both Edmund Burke and Lord (p.145) Chancellor Fitzgibbon were maliciously accused of being alumni. To have a St Omar mother, therefore, was to be labelled with the badge of Catholic tenacity; Nugents might compromise or conform, but St Omars, having the fixity of place, could not change. To recognize the connotations of the name is to understand the real motives behind Colambre's hesitation in marrying Grace. The combination of Nugent and St Omar marks her as a symbol of Catholic resistance; he on the other hand bears a 'union title', a product of the corrupt and exclusively Protestant Irish parliament.\textsuperscript{41}

It is worth pausing in this analysis of names to anticipate one or two details of a critical assessment of the evidence. Maria Edgeworth does not allow her concern with names to paralyse the narrative; the use of names is dramatic and occasional as well as emblematic and pervasive. Through Count O'Halloran's researches Grace's legitimacy is proved, her grandfather traced, and her wealth recovered. Her father, however, had been a soldier in Austria; that is, he too had been an exiled Jacobite. His name being Reynolds (and not Nugent) the nugentizing taint has been removed. These reassurances are adequate and the narrative moves on. The contemporary crisis of revolutionary and Bonapartist war makes Jacobitism politically acceptable, Count Nugent demonstrating the point in his reconciliation with Arthur Wellesley. In such circumstances the St Omar taint can be transformed into legitimacy, just as in 1795 the British government had sanctioned at Maynooth a college to rival the continental seminaries. At several levels, then, the theme of Maria Edgeworth's tale is the return of absentees, but not all were voluntary emigrants or careless landlords—some had been banished, some were disgraced.
Miss Nugent, however, is specifically Grace Nugent. When the entire family returns to Ireland we see little of the heroine; instead we overhear a harper playing a song called ‘Gracey Nugent’. It is of course an actual tune, as (p.146) recognizable to an Irish reader in 1812 as ‘Green Sleeves’ to the English, a tune composed by the greatest of Irish harpers, Torlough O'Carolan. It has been freely translated by Austin Clarke:

And so I raise my glass, content  
To drink a health to Gracey Nugent,  
Her absence circles around the table.  
Empty the rummer while you are able,  
Two Sundays before Lent.42

The heroine is drawn into a folk tradition, an embodiment of excellence and dignity. According to Maria Edgeworth's design, she is present once again, a restored and restoring influence in the broad and inclusive network of social alliances in the tale.
Despite the historical and social substance of these discoveries, they have in fact been made primarily by an examination of the fiction itself. If it is objected that we have taken liberties with Miss St Omar by seeing her name as a place-name rather than a personal one, it is worth recalling how deliberately Maria Edgeworth named a series of minor figures who surround Grace Nugent—Mr St Albans, Mr Salisbury, Mr Martingale of Martingale, Mr Soho. The significance of the heroine’s name is not that it is a ‘real’ one—all names in fiction must to some extent be so chosen—but that its connotations are directly pertinent to the theme of the tale. To read *The Absentee* as an autonomous document without relation to an external world is especially difficult, because it insists on the value of relation, exploration, and reconciliation. The problem of method may in fact be largely an illusion, the difficulty arising from the conscious effort which modern readers must make to recognize various references. What may appear as the application of external criteria (social relevance, topographical consistency) is really an examination of the fiction itself, of the hidden allusions within it, and the manner in which these are related one to another and to the tale as a whole. To scrutinize Miss Nugent for the implications of her name may prove very revealing, (p. 147) and certainly offers a refreshing perspective on the hero; yet the words which constitute her presence in the fiction are part of a larger and wider pattern, a pattern which can be observed in various ways—in terms of symbol, reference or narration. A character cannot be isolated from a fictional context, because ‘he’ or ‘she’ is defined by and remains part of a continuous entity.

3. A Cultural Context
A literary work exists in a multiple context. Yeats’s *Last Poems*, for example, may be regarded as part of a tradition including Thomas Davis, James Clarence Mangan, and Sir Samuel Ferguson, and as a successor to neo-Platonists such as Boehme, Swedenborg, and Blake. He is a contemporary both of Parnell and of Rilke. His measure may be taken from the fact that none of these irreconcilable figures is irrelevant to an understanding of Yeats: the great artist creates a new context for himself.
Here we shall confine ourselves within narrower limits. Techniques developed by exponents of comparative literature provide a means to relate Maria Edgeworth’s work to European and British traditions, but for the most part the emphasis will remain Irish and historical. With The Absentee in mind, one might look for a chronology from the Norman invasion to the campaign of the Provisional IRA, from the arrival of the first Nugent in Ireland to the murderous results of the Provisionals’ adherence to a neo-Jacobite contempt for the reality of existing institutions. While it is tempting to explore parallels between the eighteenth-century loyalty to a monarch over the waves (and a thoroughly reactionary monarch at that) and the loyalty of latter-day Provisionals to ‘the first Dail Eireann’, such extensive contexts are rarely useful for they dilute, rather than concentrate, the bonds between the text under scrutiny and the world in which it lives and to which it gives meaning. But given the particular self-consciousness of Irish history, it is quite proper to relate The Absentee to the course of events in Ireland (and elsewhere) from 1688 onwards, from the Glorious Revolution which unseated King James. After a succession of (p.148) military disasters at ‘Deny, Aughrim, Enniskillen and the Boyne’, the Irish Jacobites were forced to accept terms in the Treaty of Limerick (1691). Such guarantees of their rights as they received proved inadequate, and the Penal code of the next few decades progressively restricted Catholics in their administration of property and the practice of their religion, as well as in a host of minor but irritating aspects of social life. Legends of Jacobite suffering and endurance enlivened much Gaelic literature and music during the period. Thus, the harper’s greeting of Grace Nugent is as important a recognition scene as that in which Mrs Raffarty proclaims Colambre’s presence in the castle. Considered from the historical point of view, it reverberates with great intensity in that she is recognized by a communal anthem which speaks of a pattern reaching beyond any single individual. ‘Gracey Nugent’, of course, was available to Maria Edgeworth in several published sources—not to mention its currency in the Irish countryside.43
It would indeed be extraordinary if the tale did not reveal a familiarity with eighteenth-century tradition and nomenclature; the aspect of *The Absentee* which is artistically relevant here is its consistent relation of terms and names in such a way as to enrich the narrative stratum. The song’s integrating function may be appreciated if we pay attention to Donal O’Sullivan's notes to his study of O’Carolan, especially where he quotes a letter of Charles O’Conor’s, identifying the historical Grace Nugent as ‘a worthy lady, the sister of the late worthy John Nugent of Castle Nugent, Culambre’.44 Thus the union between the fictional characters—Nugent and Colambre—is implicit in the provenance of the song. Indeed, O’Carolan’s compositions include many references to the Nugent family which are germane to an analysis of *The Absentee*; apart from ‘Gracey Nugent’ there are at least three (p.149) other pieces celebrating members of the family. In Lee’s *Favourite Collection* (1780) we find ‘John Nugent of Colamber’ and ‘Mrs. Nugent’, the latter also appearing in Thompson’s *Hibernian Muse* (c.1786). A third song, ‘Elizabeth Nugent’ is preserved in manuscript, and printed by O’Sullivan (1958). All four Nugents thus commemorated were members of the same branch of the family, the Nugents of Coolamber, County Longford. And the occasion of ‘John Nugent’ is identical with that in *The Absentee* when the harper greets Lord Colambre’s bride, for it was written to ‘Welcome to Ireland, and to Castle Nugent, a lady who has come over from France and who is apparently the bride-to-be.’.45 In the fiction, Grace Nugent may be said to have ‘come over’ from French loyalties and principles in being cleared of the St Omar taint. ‘Mrs. Nugent’ includes the line:

’s tu oidre an Chuil Omra, an breagan san tseomra

which may be translated:

And you are heiress to Coolamber, the allurement in the room.46

Such details emphasize the close association, not only in family annals but also in the popular art of Jacobitism, of the names Nugent and Coolamber. Thus, the sub-plot of *The Absentee* which steers hero and heroine into marriage is far from aimless or irrelevant; it takes its direction immediately from history.
The Nugents were not the only family celebrated in song, nor were they without extensive connections by marriage in the north midlands. Grace Nugent, in *The Absentee*, is discovered to be really a Reynolds and, in Lord Colambre's words, 'there are so many Reynoldses.' Nugent and Reynolds, however, were conjoined in the names of two moderately well-known Irishmen of the period before the Union. The first, George Nugent Reynolds, was murdered in 1786 in a rigged duel. The second, also George Nugent Reynolds, a minor poet, died in 1802. Though the exact relationship between them is difficult to establish, their ancestor was George Reynolds of Letterfian, who had been O'Carolan's first patron, about the year 1692. Reynolds therefore was a name associated with both O'Carolan and Nugent; we find among the composer's titles ‘George Reynolds’ (or ‘Planxty Reynolds’ as it is sometimes known) and ‘Madame Reynolds’. James Hardiman went so far as to suggest in his *Irish Minstrelsy* that ‘Gracey Nugent’ was a first cousin of ‘George Reynolds’.

These details are not irrelevant to Maria Edgeworth's fiction, for they indicate that her choice of names conformed to patterns well established in Irish society, particularly in the region (Westmeath and Longford) from which she hailed. Popular music, from as early as 1692, preserved the collocations of Nugent and Coolamber, Nugent and Reynolds; the protracted conclusion of *The Absentee* enacts and extends this eighteenth-century pattern in a new context defined by the claims of landlordism and the military life—that is, residence or exile. The tale conforms to the historical pattern, not only in its collocations of names, but also in relating specific themes to the names. Seeing Grace Nugent as exemplifying the dignity of the ‘Wild Geese’ we can look also to the depiction of Count O'Halloran, to the contribution he makes to the deciphering of Grace's past, to St Omar as the suspect past and Reynolds as the rehabilitated past. Confirmation of the St Omar symbolism and its idiomatic meaning in Irish life may be conveniently found in a letter of George Nugent Reynolds, the younger. The poet had been dismissed from his magistracy by the Lord Chancellor, John Fitzgibbon. Apostasy was prominent in Fitzgibbon's coat-of-arms, his forebears being Catholics and his own dedication to Protestant supremacism near-fanatical. Fitzgibbon was much feared in Ireland, but Reynolds's response to dismissal was a flamboyantly frank letter in which he averred:
'Had your lordship, like your father been destined for the Popish priesthood, you would have had the benefit of a St. Omer's education, and, of consequence, known more decency and more good manners.'\(^{50}\) It is important to note that this letter has no direct bearing on *The Absentee*, apart from illustrating the use of the seminary as a short-hand term for committed and principled Catholicism, for the tradition of foreign education which distinguished Jacobites and candidates for the priesthood. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the eclipse of Scottish Jacobitism and the improved condition of Ireland resulted in a reconsideration of the Catholic education issue: Edmund Burke was prominent among advocates of a more liberal policy, and he recommended a separate establishment in Ireland for the training of priests. Then, as the historian Lecky put it, ‘the French Revolution and the war of 1793 forced the question into sudden ripeness by making the foreign education of ecclesiastical students im-possible.’\(^{51}\) This revolutionary alarm came much nearer home when rebellion broke out in Ulster and south Leinster, and French troops invaded Connaught. In 1798 the Edgeworths saw and heard within a mile or so of their home the terrible effects of those French principles which R. L. Edgeworth had been advocating as late as 1795. It was a decade in which a generation of liberals in Britain learned to swallow their enthusiasm for the Revolution, but nowhere was the process more distasteful and inevitable than in Ireland. George Nugent Reynolds, who had scolded a lord chancellor (albeit ironically) for lacking the St Omer virtues, reacted vehemently to the French invasion; his musical piece ‘Bantry Bay’ is written in loyally anti-Jacobin terms. Though he is merely a convenient external point of reference in discussing *The Absentee*, Reynolds in these few details embodies a combination of attitudes implicit in Maria Edgeworth's (p.152) plot—generosity to the Jacobite past, hostility to radical interference with existing class structures, and a concern for a broadly based reunification of the kingdom.
The Absentee

The revolutionary present informs *The Absentee* obliquely, in keeping with the diffused evidence of the past. The London of the Clonbrony's gala is swirling with the excitement and prosperity of a war boom, and though Napoleon Bonaparte is never mentioned, the revolutionary emperor's influence is felt by the guests in Grosvenor Square. When Colambre crosses to Dublin his first acquaintance is a professional soldier whose presence mutely points to the military crisis. Soldiers accompany Lady Dashfort on her tour, and doing so not only indicate her political loyalties but also exemplify the anxious cooperation of the newly united countries—Britain and Ireland—in the wake of rebellion. At Halloran Castle, the Count welcomes Captain Williamson, Major Benson, and Colonel Heathcock as potential allies:

> turning to the officers, he said, he had just heard that several regiments of English militia had lately landed in Ireland; that one regiment was arrived at Killpatrick's town. He rejoiced in the advantages Ireland, and he hoped he might be permitted to add, England, would probably derive from the exchange of the militia of both countries: habits would be improved, ideas enlarged. The two countries have the same interest; and, from the inhabitants discovering more of each other's good qualities, and interchanging little good offices in common life, their esteem and affection for each other would increase, and rest upon the firm basis of mutual utility.\(^{52}\)

In the light of these professions of common purpose, the soldiers' embarrassment in addressing O'Halloran (as *Mister* instead of *Count*) is seen to be more than ignorance or gaucherie; it is their blundering attempt to assimilate the Jacobite into their scheme of things. Insisting on her character's continental title, Maria Edgeworth indicates that the common interest of Ireland and England shall not be advanced by ignoring the past, but by positively acknowledging it: the Count comes to play a crucial part in tempering Colambre's later military ambitions. His welcome to the soldiers, however, is couched in the same indirect mode of \((p.153)\) expression which marked Sir James Brooke's discussion of Dublin society; at this stage of the tale it remains inert, merely intentional.
Like Brooke, O’Halloran introduces the returning absentee to a book which is more effective than the characters’ indirect testimony:

Lord Colambre, with the count’s permission, took up a book in which the count’s pencil lay, ‘Pasley on the Military Policy of Great Britain;’ it was marked with many notes of admiration, and with hands pointing to remarkable passages.

‘That is a book that leaves a strong impression on the mind,’ said the count.

Lord Colambre read one of the marked passages, beginning with ‘All that distinguishes a soldier in outward appearance from a citizen is so trifling—’ but at his instant our hero’s attention was distracted by seeing in a black-letter book this title of a chapter: ‘Burial-place of the Nugents.’

The alternatives of present and past are placed before Colambre in such elemental terms as these, and though he chooses to be distracted by history from policy, his motives are those of clearing up the obscurities of Grace Nugent's origins, of removing the obstacles to their union and the reconciliation of their loyalties. Charles William Pasley had published several editions of the first part of his Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire prior to 1812, and in the emergency of the war against Napoleon the essay was constantly revised and never completed. In 1812, the year of The Absentee, his practical contribution to the war effort was acknowledged by the establishment of a training school for non-commissioned engineers at Chatham. Count O’Halloran is a scholar of the most modern and utilitarian tactics as well as of historical and antiquarian values.
If the reader expects these references to the current military crisis to disappear from view as the hero moves further into the countryside, then his expectations in this regard—as in so many others—are disappointed. Colambre’s journey, from the village which gave him his title towards his father's seat, sees the first appearance of Larry Brady, the postillion whose letter draws the tale to its curious conclusion. The evacuees whom Colambre and his driver meet on the road are on their way to England, forced to emigrate in involuntary imitation of the fashionable absentees. The fate which awaits Brian O'Neil and his beloved Grace, should they fail to meet the agents' demands, is a similar banishment to America. The good agent in Colambre village has already applied a global image to the absentee Lord Clonbrony:

he's a great proprietor, but knows nothing of his property, nor of us. Never set foot among us, to my knowledge, since I was as high as the table. He might as well be a West India planter, and we negroes, for any thing he knows to the contrary—has no more care, nor thought about us, than if he were in Jamaica, or the other world.55

This imagery lends an ironic substance to Larry's casual condemnation of the bad agent as a 'neger', a term which he uses as meaning in some way both 'negro' and 'niggard'.56 Allusions to exploitation in the Caribbean and to enforced absenteeism among the lower classes have the effect of transforming the drab countryside between Colambre and Clonbrony Castle into a negatively universal site; there is much hustle and deception, confusion and accident which serves to bring out the consequences of a landowner's absenteeism, consequences which reach beyond Ireland, as Larry's brother in the London coachmaker's yard exemplifies. The Jamaican allusion also takes up the implications of O'Halloran's interest in Pasley's Military Policy, for the Caribbean was a theatre of war in which Britain opposed France. The Napoleonic campaigns have left their mark on the balladry of Ireland, especially in the form of exotic names and distant destinations, and the images employed by Mr Burke and Larry Brady are not in themselves implausible. But there is a further cogency to the Jamaican reference, in that George Nugent, who had commanded one of the northern regions during the Irish rebellion of 1798, had left Ireland to become Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica in 1801. The point is
not simply that the name Nugent once more contributes some link between disparate elements in *The Absentee*; both Ireland and Jamaica were important theatres of conflict in which Britain faced revolutionary violence.\(^{57}\) These casual invocations of West Indian exploitation and cursory allusions to a manual of military tactics cannot be said to be integrated into the fiction, as a comparison with Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* must confirm. There, the contemporary crisis is never so obviously invoked as to reveal a copy of Pasley on Sir Thomas Bertram's table. Nevertheless, Sir Thomas is temporarily cast as an absentee himself when he is detained in Antigua, and Fanny's brother follows a successful career in the Royal Navy; neither detail can be fully appreciated without reference to the war at sea. Jane Austen is content to leave these allusions on the periphery of her fiction, and to concentrate on the moral consequences of Sir Thomas's enforced absenteeism and on developing Fanny's proper assumption of her importance at Mansfield. Maria Edgeworth, on the other hand, displays a nervous insistence in placing Pasley and Jamaica before the reader. Even though we may feel that the atavism of the blind harper is to some extent counterbalanced by this emphasis on the urgency of a contemporary crisis, it cannot be denied that the texture of *The Absentee* fails to absorb all of the author's devices.

It is in fact only in the final chapters that she attempts to reconcile the opposing values represented by the books on Count O'Halloran's table, and once again these chapters reveal their relevance to the theme of absenteeism. When O'Halloran arrives in London, he explains his movements to Lord Colambre:

\[p.156\] A relation of mine, who is one of our ministry, knew that I had some maps, and plans, and charts, which might be serviceable in an expedition they are planning. I might have entrusted my charts across the channel, without coming myself to convey them, you will say. But my relation fancied—young relations, you know, if they are good for any thing, are apt to overvalue the heads of old relations—fancied that mine was worth bringing all the way from Halloran Castle to London, to consult with tête-à-tête. So, you know, when this was signified to me by a letter from the secretary in office, private, most confidential, what could I do, but do myself the honour to obey?\(^{58}\)
The Count is now at last receiving from the authorities the courteous address which Lady Dashfort and her soldier companions found so difficult to convey at Halloran Castle. He is not only an ‘old head’; he is the head of an old order with whom the Government is now anxious to co-operate in ‘an expedition’. In bringing his expertise and his charts to London, Count O'Halloran is fulfilling much the same role as the historical Count Nugent had done in the months preceding the publication of *The Absentee*. The tale, however, does not pursue the Count's mission on the level of verisimilitude; instead it begins to integrate the incident into a broader pattern that involves both Colambre and Grace Nugent. For we hear nothing further of O'Halloran's relatives in the Ministry; or rather, the purpose of his visit is assumed into the hero's dilemma concerning the St Omar taint, and the Count is next discovered advising Colambre on the merits and demerits of a military career. Why then does Colambre reject the military life? First of all, the discussion of an officer's existence is a part of the transformation of the Count's London mission into the reconciliation of Nugent and Colambre; it is part of a process by which verisimilitude becomes emblem, a process implicit in the music of Turlough O'Carolan. And secondly, the military life—as the Count knows only too well—is a life of exile, and it has occurred to Colambre primarily as an escape from his feelings for Grace, his cousin. The transformation of this dilemma can only be achieved by a renewed attention to the past rather than the military future.

The harking (or harping) back (p.157) evident in Larry Brady's account of the celebrations at Clonbrony Castle is not only counterbalanced by the imagery of contemporary crisis, but an attempt is made to relate past and present through the changing symbolism of the retired soldier's mission to London, a mission ostensibly concerned with maps and charts but ultimately fulfilled in the discovery of a marriage certificate.
That Maria Edgeworth in her fiction was concerned with contemporary revolutionary alarms cannot be doubted. In the first series of *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809), ‘Ennui’ (which bears a close resemblance to *The Absentee* in that the hero leaves England for Ireland and discovers his real self) includes an Irish attempt at rebellion; ‘Emilie de Coulanges’ which appeared with *The Absentee* in the second series of the *Tales*, features refugees from revolutionary France. The Edgeworths had toured France during a lull in the hostilities with Britain, and Maria absorbed her experiences so deeply as to draw on them freshly when she wrote *Ormond* in 1817. Moreover, her brother had failed to leave France in time, and spent eleven years in prison; he was not released until 1814, and was therefore still in French hands when *The Absentee* was written. And if the tale of 1812 seems remote from specifically Irish disturbances—1798 or 1803—there is some evidence to suggest that it was either conceived at an earlier date or deliberately constructed with earlier material in mind. Croker’s pamphlet of 1804, Hoare’s travels of 1807, Carr’s of the same year—all these are indirectly invoked in *The Absentee*. Mrs Butler, in the definitive biography, notes that ‘Emilie de Coulanges’ was devised as early as 1803.59 Although Maria Edgeworth wrote virtually all her Irish fiction in great haste, its allusive density points to a proportionally long period of gestation.

The year 1798 differed from previous crises in many ways. Edgeworth interest in Longford was now the centre of the family, English holdings being regarded as peripheral. R. L. Edgeworth, as a Member of Parliament, occupied a more explicitly political position than many of his resident forebears. Previous military campaigns had been focused on conflicts of a less clearly ideological kind: 1798, by reason of its revolutionary context, demanded an intellectual as well as a domestic response. Since the Jacobite wars of a century earlier, no such crisis had arisen in Ireland. A French army was marching through the midlands, supported spasmodically by bands of rebels whose inspiration was more often local vengeance than abstract ideological zeal. The rebellion had indeed broken out elsewhere on the island, but the French presence was limited to the west and the north midlands. Thus, where the Edgeworths were uniquely isolated, the French troops stimulated in their enemies a unique response of slaughter, cruelty, rumourmongering, and treachery. R. L.
Edgeworth's political isolation was near-complete; by reputation an eccentric if not a radical (and certainly no friend of the new Orange element in the county), he was suspect in the eyes of the local gentry and their armed militia; by breeding and by his social role cut off from the tenantry, he became overnight transformed from radical anchorite to fool-in-the-middle. The war against Irish rebels was conducted with the utmost barbarity: about two hundred ill-equipped wretches were butchered in the demesne at Wilson's Hospital, though the invading French army remained intact. Its destination was Dublin, and its course lay just north of Granard. A government force under Lord Cornwallis camped in the parish of Clonbroney early in September, and met Humbert's troops at Ballinamuck on 8 September. Out-numbered by about five to one, the invading revolutionaries were finally defeated. The alarm in Longford/Westmeath had lasted a little over a fortnight, but the advance of professional French soldiers, in league with a desperate western tenantry, had brought the Edgeworths closer to extinction than they had been for over one hundred years. The boundary of their survival was the short distance between Edgeworthstown and Ballinamuck; from it father and daughter had fled to the town of Longford for safety. There, with the camp-fires of the French visible from the walls, the citizens tried to lynch R. L. Edgeworth as a spy. The grounds—as Edmund Burke might put it—of their survival must be studied carefully, for the map of this patch of land bears a number of names immediately relevant to The Absentee—the townlands of (p.159) Coolamber and Coolamber Manor, the townland and parish of Clonbroney (the latter including Firmont), the townland of Castlenugent. Clonbroney includes both Ballinamuck (where the French were finally halted) and St Johnstown (the borough which R. L. Edgeworth represented in the Irish House of Commons.)

60 In creating the character of Clonbrony Maria Edgeworth dramatized the history of her own landed interest in Ireland, emphasizing the conflicting loyalties which had gone into the making of her heritage. The Williamite element is perhaps taken for granted, though its sectarian excess is deplored or depreciated. But the Jacobite and French connection was even more dramatic; Louis XVI's confessor had been the Abbe Henry Essex Edgeworth, who took his title 'de Firmont' from his birthplace in the same district. That a novel of reconciliation should take up these names, and use them to analyse the effects of absenteeism in moral rather than
political terms, indicates the confident strength which Maria Edgeworth brought from her experience of the moral tale to the writing of fiction. *The Absentee* makes no explicit reference to the violence of 1798; the task of literature was not simply to reflect the past, but to generate the transformations which it required. *The Absentee* is not didactic in its argument, but in its symbolic demonstrations.

The heroine's function as emblem of a renovated past, the inner coherence of the characters' names taken as a group, the contemporary relevance of the reconciliation theme to the author's experience (both immediate and familial), these elements possess a multiple dependence on each other which contributes to an over-all artistic integrity. Setting, character, metaphor are not separable items in a physical reaction which (p.160) may be reversed and cancelled; on the contrary they unite in a chemistry which is active and persistent. Nevertheless, the plot of *The Absentee* remains to be assessed; and here, we must take care not to accept plot as effectively the *summum* of the tale, but rather insist that plot—like character or setting—is part (but only part) of a larger artistic unity. Walter Allen has spoken of its ostensible relevance:

> in *The Absentee* Maria Edgeworth had seized upon the essential situation of her country at the time of writing: the absence of its landowners in England and the stranglehold their agents had on a helpless peasantry. And when we visit Ireland in the company of Lord Colambre, the Clonbronys' son, whose aim it is to induce his parents to return to their native land and take up their proper duties there, we might be in nineteenth-century Russia, in that world of sequestered petty landowners, culturally almost indistinguishable from their peasants, among whom every kind of eccentricity flourished ... *The Absentee*, then, has a theme that was of the highest importance in its day.61

There are good reasons, however, for seeing absenteeism not so much as the theme as the outward plot of the tale; and this is just as well, for contemporary relevance alone cannot raise itself into art.
Two kinds of ignorance are combated in the course of the narrative, two kinds of darkness dispelled. On the geographical plane, the worlds of London and the Irish midlands are brought into a tense relation through the conduct of the Clonbrony family, whose surnames and even Christian names are withheld from us lest the importance of place-names be ignored. The absentees learn to recognize Ireland as their home, not in any spiritual or romantically nationalist sense, but, as it were, logically: the anomaly of Colambre in London is rejected. This level of narrative has of course its contemporary aptness; the Dublin banker William Digges La Touche, at a meeting in 1798, laid much of the blame for the Insurrection on the absentees, declaring that

if these men had resided in their own country among their tenantry, it is more than probable that we would never have been afflicted by that rebellion by which we have been reduced to that state of (p.161) humiliation and weakness, which has subjected our liberties, our manners, and our name to insult and threatened attack.62

The threat was of Union with Britain. R. L. Edgeworth had shared La Touche's contempt for the absentees, but after his experiences in the Insurrection, he had supported Union on principle (though he came to vote against it in practice!) La Touche was quite frank in admitting his motives as an anti-Unionist, and his ironical-rhetorical thinking sheds light on Maria Edgeworth's depiction of Dublin's middle class. How, demands the banker, would Union help us?

Is it to be an increase of our absentees and a decrease of our population? Is it by these our commerce is to be improved? ... I divest myself of every feeling but those immediately connected with the mercantile character ... I do say that in a Legislative Union with Great Britain, we are certain of nothing but loss ...63

Neither Edgeworth nor La Touche had a monopoly of wisdom or even consistency, for Edgeworth finally voted against the Union in protest at the corrupt methods of the authorities, and La Touche's bank survived the Union by many prosperous years.
Only propaganda is plain and simple: the nexus involving absenteeism, rebellion, and Union was infinitely more complex and unclear. *The Absentee* reflects this complexity in placing before Colambre's eyes, on his arrival in Dublin, evidence which cannot be read simply and plainly. The contradictions which face him are of course selected, and relate specifically to other areas of the tale, yet in this artistic complexity there is an acknowledgement of the unsettled debate in society. Far from being didactic in directing the absentees homewards, Maria Edgeworth confronts them with scenes which, through their moral condition, are transformed into a fiction of reconciliation. Dublin society and rural conditions—the ragged beggars, rootless soldiers, dreadful parvenus, and slovenly landlords—are not simply a tableau vivant existing independently of the principal characters. It is (p.162) only when this society is perceived by Colambre, and incorporated into his experience, that it takes on artistic meaning. Indeed, the beggars, soldiers, parvenus, and landlords may be seen as potential extensions of Colambre's consciousness, roles which are so to speak open to him. It is precisely because of this conflicting evidence confronting Colambre that a second plane of reconciliation has to be considered, involving not a topographical or spatial dimension, but a historical one. Grace Nugent functions as the epitome of the Jacobite past on the eve of rehabilitation, O'Halloran as the necessary but outmoded accoucheur of this process. Reconciliation presupposes reassessment, and there is abundant evidence of a renewed interest in the past, a sensitivity to titles, a veneration of urns and genealogies, an eagerness to explore. Absenteeism, as the tale's plot, does not simply monopolize thematic concerns; the plot operates as emblem also, for the essence of the absentee's dilemma is that he denies connection, connection between place and person, community and individual, present and past. That the evidence inducing Colambre to abandon absenteeism is contradictory takes on a special significance when read as symbolic of a broader theme of reconciliation. For while much is learned of the Jacobite past, nothing is revealed of the Williamite inheritance. Perhaps this is a necessary limitation of Maria Edgeworth's method, a consequence of her choice of a hero without epic qualities. Yet these consequences cannot be ignored, and they include the very imperfect self-discovery of the absentees and their purely ceremonial integration into the rural community.
Having seen something of the historical context in which *The Absentee* was written, we can return to the final chapter to scrutinize the manner in which Maria Edgeworth describes the scene at Clonbrony Castle. If the tale were to reach its climax in the blind harper's playing of 'Gracey Nugent' without some counterbalancing imagery, the result would be to draw *The Absentee* away from its concern with contemporary society. For Grace Nugent functions in the last movement of the fiction (Larry Brady's letter) almost exclusively as historical emblem, the rapid development of her consciousness as character being apparently forgotten; her (p.163) spontaneous speech and expanding interior reflections do not impinge in a single instance on Larry's letter. If the O'Carolan tune were the sole unifying image of reconciliation, then the result very likely would be a sentimental return to a past already declining in relevance. Though the recognition of a revolutionary alarm behind O'Halloran's mission to London counterbalances O'Carolan—just as Pasley's policy and Nugent history divide his table between them—the final movement lacks poise and conviction, its uncertainties half-concealed behind Larry's racy dialect. When style relaxes sufficiently to allow renewed contact with a narrative line, we find that Lord Clonbrony and Colambre can offer only fair play to their tenants—an arrangement previously evident under the regime of the good agent, Mr Burke, while their lordships were absentees. There is no indication as to how Colambre and his wife will manage the estate, no attention to the agricultural economy over which they will preside. Detail of the kind which invigorated *Castle Rackrent* cannot be provided; stylistically, this disability stems from the disappearance of social satire from these final pages—satire flourishing on vivid detail. In terms of social analysis, the new situation of the landlords as resident does not inaugurate any new relationship between tenant and master. Ultimately *The Absentee* reduces social reality to personal moral rectitude; a striking reversal has taken place in the course of the tale for, commencing with an acknowledgement that morality is social, it finally suggests the very different proposition that moral intention can support a social function. It is in fact Larry, the solitary spokesman of the tenants, who points out the diminished role of the landlord on the estate; directed by Colambre to bring his aged father forward, Larry appreciates a passing whimsical reference:
he knows the *nature* of us, Paddy, and how we love a joke in our hearts, as well as if he had lived all his life in Ireland; and by the same token will, for that *raison*, do what he pleases with us, and more may be than a man twice as good, that never would smile on us.\textsuperscript{64}

Technically, this is a superbly controlled evasion, moving (p. 164) from the pleasantry of Colambre's joke to a very different implication that he will do 'what he pleases'. It is not merely the joke which was awkward, nor the admission that a jovial landlord may behave however he likes, may do more than a man *twice as good*. Colambre, in this final movement utilizes the last of the political metaphors already observed in O'Halloran's study and the Clonbrony office. On these occasions, Colambre resisted identification as invader or conqueror amid the emblems of O'Halloran's castle, and asserted control in ousting Nicholas Garraghty when the agent was presented as viceroy in the presence-chamber. Here, Colambre neither resists or asserts; he presides. And the political metaphor adopted is that of the chief-justice; initially Colambre jokingly says that he has a 'warrant' for Larry's father, and once again it is Larry who perceives the depth of the imagery:

> 'I've a warrant for you, father,' says I; 'and must have you bodily before the justice, and my lord chief justice.'

So he changed colour a bit at first; but he saw me smile.

> 'And I've done no sin,' said he; 'and, Larry, you may lead me now, as you led me all my life.'\textsuperscript{65}

With the blameless and infirm elder Brady led before him, Colambre's role as chief justice is seen as entirely vacant and nugatory, an image in keeping with other aspects of Larry's letter, the relegation of Grace Nugent, the indirect presentation of the other principals, and the special dispensation for jovial residential landlords.
Of course it is possible to see this as merely the slackening of pace necessary for a smooth conclusion to the tale, a *jeu d'esprit* immune to finicking analysis. Alternatively, it might be regarded as a further acknowledgement of the unfinished state of eighteenth-century hostilities. And like *Castle Rackrent*, *The Absentee* concludes by placing two representatives of the tenantry before the reader. But whereas Thady Quirk has given the lie on the Rackrents, and they in turn are about to be succeeded by Jason Quirk, in *The Absentee* it would appear that the initiative remains firmly with the Clonbronys and their heirs. This renewed confidence in the landlords, (p.165) coupled with the curious morality of bringing blameless and hitherto neglected characters before a tribunal including the Clonbronys, surely marks a dramatic change in Maria Edgeworth's thought. The means which she recommends may be ostensibly progressive, but the motivation has become conservative. Thomas Flanagan has spoken in general terms of a dilemma of the Edgeworths and their fellow Anglo-Irish liberals, 'As a group they were to fail wretchedly, even on their own estates, for the Irish land problem was hopeless of solution at the level of private action, however self-sacrificing. On the level of national politics they were to be caught between their own class, callous and grasping, and a peasantry which had chosen its own leaders.' The critic writes with the legitimate benefit of hindsight; the novelist creates with the flawed yet synthesizing gift of perception. *The Absentee* acknowledges the uncertainty of its context by withholding an ultimately conclusive reconciliation. In keeping with her family's secular outlook Maria Edgeworth rarely mentions the conflicting denominations of the Irish countryside, but rather concentrates on political implications. If Grace Nugent and Colambre stand in some way for these then *The Absentee* suggests, but does not impose, reconciliation through the symbol of marriage: their wedding is heralded but held back from the reader. Once again symbolic narrative and verisimilitude harmonize; the refusal to conclude with wedding bells avoids easy sentiment and acknowledges the persisting difficulties in bringing Catholic and Protestant, Jacobite and Williamite, together. Reservations dominate the final pages despite and through the dialect humour of Larry Brady. In dialectical terms, *The Absentee* advances antithesis rather than thesis.
It could not be said, then, that it presents a Burkean world in the manner of *Castle Rackrent*. There are however implicit Burkean longings—the rectification of past offence, the combination of rival goods to oppose drastic change, the identity of place and personality. It is surely no accident that the true agent of Lord Clonbrony’s interests is named Mr Burke. In more profound ways also *The Absentee* looks back to the author of the *Reflections*. Throughout his polemic against the revolution in France, Burke used (as we have seen) the image of the Great House, the estate, and the garden as symbolic of a proper order and continuity in the State. Such a continuity speaks of stability rather than change, or when it requires change it insists on organic growth and not artificial contrivance and reforming. But, as events in France had only too clearly shown, this model of permanence was vulnerable to drastic change: nature in its order had not excluded the possibility of disorder. Burke’s lamentations over the fall of France could be read as late exercises in the style of the mutability ode—with this proviso that the agent or vehicle of violent change (when it is not ‘your literary men, and your politicians’) is money, commerce, trade. These values must not be confused with wealth or property which has a redeeming inertia and a tendency towards unequal accumulations. Society is a contract, Burke allows, but not a contract in mere goods and chattels. The vocabulary of wealth inheritance and due legal process is used to illustrate the impropriety of change:

One of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth 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 prosperity, 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 a habitation.67
Such language finds its supreme literary reflection in *Mansfield Park* but it is clearly at one with Maria Edgeworth's intentions also. A little further on in his *Reflections*, Burke concentrates this imagery with much savagery on the responsibilities of the limited individual in the Burkean world—'No man can mortgage his injustice as a pawn for his fidelity.' This is not the place to discuss the metaphoric use of commerce either in Burke or in literature generally, nor to open up the possibility that such imagery reveals Burke's understanding (albeit (p.167) implicit) of the economic objectives of the revolution. Instead we should recognize that the symbolism of *The Absentee* mediates between the debate of noble and merchant in the Catholic cabals of 1812 and the world-view of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The juxtaposition of Mrs Raffarty and Count O'Halloran (the latter with his *ancien régime* manners) is more than local colour or contemporary verisimilitude. And is it not characteristic of much Anglo-Irish literature that it stands, or is given its precarious footing, between political action and political thought?

A second area in which Burke affects *The Absentee* may at first glance seem trivial. In the fragmentary ‘Notes on the Genius & Style of Burke’ Maria Edgeworth deals almost exclusively with literary technique rather than ideas, a significant response from a novelist whose work-sheets are for the most part factual and intellectual. She concludes that ‘allusions in general [are] preferable to similies’ and she particularly notes ‘allusions by a single word’. 68 There is no form of allusion less comparable to simile that the proper names of *The Absentee*: the nominalist approach exploits the single word to the highest degree. But on the same page of jottings, she acknowledges that a ‘popular writer must be regulated in choice of allusions by the actual state of knowledge in his country’. 69 Quite clearly, the majority of readers of *Tales of Fashionable Life* had never heard of such landmarks as Coolamber or Clonbrony, even if they recognized an allusive quality in St Omar. Has Maria Edgeworth interwoven a private meaning into her published fiction; do the allusive place-names suggest a *roman a clef*? The answer may be found either by returning to our opening remarks on the manner in which sources, in literature, are transformed into method, or by looking at the psychology of creativity in the particular case of Maria Edgeworth. Her training as a writer of moral tales encouraged a positively superficial approach to literature: the young (for whom she originally wrote) required an evident and discernible meaning rather than a (p.168) profound obscurity; characters bear transparent names like Frank or Lucy. As we have seen, *The Absentee* resembles this school of
writing in some ways, but its explicit theme (the desirability and possibility of successful resident landlordism) is undermined by contradictions, evasions, and reservations—Sir James Brooke's ambiguous pamphlet, Larry Brady's concluding letter, etc. The pressure of these conflicts, and maybe a subconscious recognition of their intractability in the circumstances of the time, brought Maria Edgeworth in contact with (literally) the grounds of her experience. These allusions do not add any literary meaning to The Absentee which is not already discernible through an analysis of the plot, but they do authenticate that analysis by making specific a trauma which the fiction strives to transform. If there is any truth in Conor Cruise O'Brien's argument that the energy of the Reflections derives ultimately from Burke's Irish experience of the violence (and, in a sense, the necessity) of revolution, there yet remains the infinitely larger context of Europe in 1790 to which he explicitly addresses himself. So too with Maria Edgeworth we study the sources of her art in order to attend fully to the art itself.

Notes:


(4) op. cit.

(5) op. cit.

(6) op. cit.


(9) Ibid.

(10) Ibid.
(11) [John Wilson Croker], An Intercepted Letter from J—T—Esq., Writer at Canton to his Friend in Dublin, Ireland (Dublin, 1804), p. 5.


(14) Tales, vol. ix, p. 126.

(15) Ibid.

(16) John Ferrar, A View of Ancient and Modern Dublin with its Improvements to the Year 1796, to which is Added a Tour to Bellevue, in the County of Wicklow, the Seat of Peter La Touche, Esq. (Dublin, 1796), p. 111.

(17) Robert Fraser, A General View of ... County Wicklow (Dublin, 1801), pp. 63–4. For a modern account of the picturesque as manifested in County Wicklow villas see Edward Malins and The Knight of Glin, Lost Demesnes: Irish Landscape Gardening, 1660–1845 (London, 1976), esp. pp. 168–78, 187–8. Bellevue is discussed in some detail, and a watercolour drawing of one of the glass-houses is reproduced. Malins and Fitzgerald also discuss the distribution of cottages ornés (‘more common in Ireland than in England’) which are condemned in The Absentee; in this connection they specify a cottage on the La Touche estate at Marlay, County Dublin as representative (see pp. 119–20, and p. 123).


(19) op. cit.


(21) Ibid.


(23) op. cit.

The Absentee

(25) Ibid.

(26) Ibid., vol. ix, p. 166. The allusion is ultimately to
Herodotus; see The Histories, trans. A. de Selincourt
313–14; the incident (in Bk. IV) relates to the ambiguous
intention lying behind the Scythian gifts to the Persian invader,
Darius.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Thomas Flanagan, The Irish Novelists 1800–1850 (New

(29) W. J. Mc Cormack, ‘Sylvester O’Halloran and Maria

(30) Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography

(31) op. cit.

(32) Donald Davie, The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott (London:
Routledge, 1961), p. 72. In a more recent study of the novel in
this period, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1975), Marilyn Butler devotes a lengthy
chapter to Maria Edgeworth’s fiction. Mrs Butler, however, is
primarily concerned with ‘Maria Edgeworth’s peculiarly
sharp perception of the ethical content of feminine lives’ (p.
132) and has little to say about The Absentee. In addition her
use of the terms ‘Jacobin’ and ‘anti-Jacobin’ for warring
parties in English literary life renders difficult any simple
correlation of our findings. Readers especially interested in
Miss Edgeworth’s place in English literature cannot afford to
ignore this absorbing study.

(33) Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth, p. 375.

(34) Tales, vol. ix, p. 22.

(35) Ibid.

(36) J. G. Simms in Analecta Hibernica, vol. 22 (1960), pp. 11–
230.

(37) See M. Butler, Maria Edgeworth, p. 48,

(38) Tales, vol. ix, p. 63.
Horace Walpole’s Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, ed. W. S. Lewis et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), vol. ii, p. 481.

Tales, vol. ix, p. 157. For evidence that Maria Edgeworth was aware of the sectarian associations of the name St Omer we have only to turn to the glossary appended to Castle Rackrent. The narrator, Thady Quirk, has said of his son ‘I thought to make him a priest’, and the ‘editor’ of Thady’s memoranda comments: ‘It was customary amongst those of Thady’s rank in Ireland, whenever they could get a little money, to send their sons abroad to St. Omer’s, or to Spain, to be educated as priests. Now they are educated at Maynooth …’ (Tales, vol. i, p.109). That she should specify St Omer on this occasion when she sought to make purely technical point about the habits of Irish Catholics underlines the significance of the name in The Absentee’, writing the glossary she saw St Omer as the representative college of its kind, though in fact it was not an Irish but an English (Jesuit) foundation dating from 1593.

Maria Edgeworth never specifically declares Clonbrony to be a ‘union lord’, but the discussion between the young ladies at the gala (Tales, vol. ix, pp. 45–6) implicitly condemns their host and hostess in terms of ‘bought rank’. Colambre, being only 20 years old, cannot be personally accused though he bears a courtesy title as his father’s heir.

Austin Clarke, Flight to Africa and Other Poems (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1963), p. 77.


op. cit.

op. cit.

Ibid.

See G. J. Browne, A Report of the Whole of the Proceedings previous to, with a Note of the Evidence on, the Trial of Richard Keon, for the Murder of George Nugent Reynolds, and also of the Charges of the Judges thereon (Dublin, 1788)
op. cit.

James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy* (London, 1831), vol. i, p. xlvi. O’Sullivan (vol. ii, p. 66) disputes this claim on the grounds that ‘the Nugents of Carlanstown were distinct from the Nugents of Castle Nugent.’ Although the precise degree of kinship may interest genealogists, the general association of the names Nugent and Reynolds is authenticated in numerous instances. Several Nugents of earlier generations composed Gaelic poetry—see Tomas Ua Bradaigh, ‘Na Nuinnsionaigh mor teaglach Gall-Ghaelach’, *Riocht na Midhe*, vol. 3, No. 3 (1965), pp. 211–21.


op. cit.

*Tales*, vol. ix, p. 167.

Ibid.

For a brief account of Pasley see *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

*Tales*, vol. ix, p. 187.

Ibid. “Negerniggard”

*Lady Nugent's Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*, new ed. by Philip Wright (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1966) 

*Tales*, vol. ix, p. 316.

According to Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary*, Clonbroney possessed excellent resources of limestone, and in *The Absentee*, the disguised Colambre poses as a researcher in quarries. Lewis records, under Kilpatrick (cf. the tale's Kilpatrickstown) that this Westmeath parish includes ‘the ruins of an old church, with the vestiges of a fortified building nearly adjacent; and part of another fort is on the lands of Tuitestown’ (vol. ii, p. 161); Maria Edgeworth's Catholic ancestor was Jane Tuite. Topographical information embodied in this note is based on Ordnance Survey maps, and was tabulated for me by the staff of Longford-Westmeath County Library, to whom grateful acknowledgement is duly made. Estate papers relating to Edgeworth family possessions in the area are preserved in the Public Record Office Dublin.


*Proceedings at a Meeting of the Bankers and Merchants of Dublin*. Dublin, 1798, p. 7. (The pamphlet is cited by R. B. McDowell, op. cit., p. 252, as illustrating how highly the anti-unionists valued the gentry as a bond in society.)

*Tales*, vol. x, p. 52.

Ibid.

op. cit.


The MS in the possession of Mrs Christina Colvin, of Oxford; I am grateful to her and to Mrs Marilyn Butler for a copy of the relevant pages which they supplied to me.

Idem.