"My Change of Character": *Rousseauisme* and Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui*

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The title, *Ennui*, that Maria Edgeworth chose for her 1809 novel offers the first suggestion that the book was influenced by the works of the eighteenth-century French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In a passage from the fourth book of *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762) he describes the feelings of a young man who dislikes the idle lifestyle of kings as follows: "il plaint ces voluptueux de parade qui livrent leur vie entière à l'ennui, pour paraître avoir du plaisir" (318). The line, translated by Barbara Foxley as "he pities these ostentatious voluptuaries, who spend their life in deadly dullness that they may seem to enjoy its pleasures" (*Émile* 190), provides the opening image of Edgeworth's novel. Wasting his life away in the luxurious surroundings of Sherwood Park in London, the Earl of Glenthorn describes his situation as follows:

> If I might judge from my own experience, I should attribute fashionable epicurism in a great measure to ennui. Many affect it, because they have nothing else to do; and sensual indulgences are all that exist for those who have not sufficient energy to enjoy intellectual pleasures. (Edgeworth, *Ennui* 153).

Marilyn Butler assumes that Edgeworth's choice of format for the book was deliberately intended to create the "parodic equivalent of Rousseau's *Confessions* of a provincial" (24). Rousseau's influence on Edgeworth's book is undeniable, but the theme of *ennui* and the plot of the novel suggest a greater extent of indebtedness to the thoughts of the French philosopher.

Edgeworth's description of Glenthorn's life in the first few chapters of *Ennui* bears a strong affinity to Rousseau's depiction of the life of the wealthy in the passage above. Glenthorn's weekly routine consists of luxurious dinner-parties and visits to illegal, curtained, candle-lit hazard rooms. His marriage, which had been settled by the friends of a young heiress, is a mere formality. After Lady Glenthorn's elopement with Captain Crawley, the man in charge of his house in London, Glenthorn realises that his servants are becoming his masters (166). Rousseau depicted the life of the wealthy French aristocrat in much the same fashion: "As his desires are always anticipated; they never have time to spring up among his pleasures, so he only feels the tedium of restraint. Even before he knows it he is disgusted and satiated with the sex formed to be the delight of his own" (*Émile* 175). Like Rousseau, Edgeworth considered the danger for wealthy young men of slowly falling prey to their servants – a central theme also of *Castle Rackrent* – the unfortunate consequence of the negligence brought about by aristocratic *ennui*.

This absorption in Rousseau's work is not surprising given that, as Edgeworth herself noted, the books of the French philosopher were then "in everybody's hands" (*Prac-*

tical Education 1: 168). The debate regarding the state of the French education system and the proposals of the *éducateurs* for its reformation were to have a great impact around Europe and generate heated discussions in England in particular. As a result of the debate concerning the role of the government and various religious bodies in children's education, the influence of the state and the Anglican Church significantly decreased during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, notwithstanding the ongoing impact of the War of Independence on the American continent. The Dissenters Act of 1779 allowed Richard Lowell Edgeworth, Maria's father, to set up a family-run institution for children on his estate in Ireland, modelled on Rousseau's educational principles (Py 228). Edgeworth *père* and his friend, Thomas Day, were great admirers of the Frenchman, whose influence was also palpable in Day's own didactic book, *The History of Sandford and Merton*. Richard Edgeworth was determined to educate his son Dick in France according to Rousseau's system (Hare 3), but the other Edgeworth children also enjoyed the greater freedom advocated by the French philosopher (Py 156). Maria's diaries suggest that Rousseau's work and private life were often discussed at dinner tables. In a letter to Mrs Mary Sneyd, dated 10 January 1803, Edgeworth mentioned Mme d'Ouditot's gossip from the night before: "She told me that Rousseau, whilst he was writing so finely on education, and leaving his own children in the Foundling Hospital, defended himself with so much eloquence that even those who blamed him in their hearts, could not find tongues to answer him" (Hare 60).

Determined to voice her own ideas on the education and cultivation of children, Edgeworth found ways to answer Rousseau. Her first published work, *Letters from Literary Ladies* (1795), allowed her little room to formulate her own ideas, as the book was merely based on letters exchanged between her father and Thomas Day. The two-volume *Practical Education*, written with her father and published in 1798, was a much better platform to communicate her views to a wider public, especially as she alone was responsible for the first volume on the cultivation of children. At key points Edgeworth drew on Rousseau's *Émile* and she did not shy away from disagreeing with the French philosopher when she considered it necessary. While acknowledging his eloquence, Edgeworth was critical of Rousseau's suggestion for parents "to teach truth by falsehood." She considered Rousseau's anecdote, in which a gardener taught Émile about the just notion of the rights of property and the nature of exchange and barter using a series of lies, a "very dangerous counsel" (*Practical Education* 1: 169). Edgeworth firmly asserted the value of truth as both means and end: "Honesty is the best policy, must be the maxim in education, as well as in all the other affairs of life" (1: 170).

Writing at the time of French Absolutism, during which period the rigid and almost unchangeable class structure had become a burden on French society, Rousseau argued that man was born good-hearted and open-minded; it was the rules and expectations of the social system that changed man's good nature. He blamed the French education system for ingraining into children a set of social prejudices which

he considered the root of social injustice encountered in France at the time. According to Rousseau, the way to minimise social discrepancies was to introduce new ways of cultivating children. His proposition to "return to nature" – to rediscover the innate goodness he attributed to man's essential character – was taken up by the writers of European Romanticism. While disagreeing with Rousseau on certain points, Edgeworth nonetheless embraced the French philosopher's central propositions. In *Ennui* she portrays a young aristocrat who returns to rural living, arguing that a "seconde naissance" in nature had the power to induce a positive change in a man's personality. Thus, the journey of the central protagonist from England to Ireland – as from indolence to purposefulness – literally embodies the argument Rousseau expounded.

In leaving the luxurious but mind-numbing environment of his London house behind and moving to Ireland to visit his estate, the Earl of Glenthorn takes the first steps on his journey of self-discovery. Having arrived at his castle the night before and receiving an enthusiastic reception from his servants and dependants, Glenthorn opens his eyes to the picturesque landscape of the sea, wildly booming against the castle walls. He is filled with the "melancholy feeling of solitary grandeur" exuding from his new surroundings (179). Over the course of the next few days he is kept busy with calls from his tenants, who swarm into the castle courtyard to pay him homage and to ask for his protection. Soon after his arrival he is forced to confront his responsibility for the quality of other people's lives.

Glenthorn's experiences in Ireland stand in stark contrast to the life he used to know in Sherwood Park, as indicated in the opening lines of the novel: "Bred up in luxurious indolence, I was surrounded by friends who seemed to have no business in this world but to save me the trouble of thinking or acting for myself" (143). Put into a situation where he has to take responsibility for his actions, as well as for the well-being of others living on his Irish estate, Glenthorn slowly starts to develop a new way of thinking. He still enjoys the small luxuries of his aristocratic surroundings, especially when these are compared with the living conditions of some of his tenants, but the focal point of his life is slowly beginning to shift. As an act of good will, he arranges for Elinor's house to be rebuilt in the fashionable English style. He is taken with Elinor, who strikes him as different to the women he had encountered in the treacherous aristocratic circles of London. Although Glenthorn is taken aback by the rapidity with which the state of her new house deteriorates for want of cleaning, he discovers true affection in her family. He has not forgotten how the affectionate woman had saved him from self-destruction in England. Elinor inadvertently prevented him from committing suicide and subsequently lured him to the estate, where Glenthorn found a society in which family members helped each other. Edgeworth uses Elinor, a personification of Mother Ireland, to instigate Glenthorn's journey to his Irish estate, and it is within the country setting of his Irish demesne that Glenthorn's "return to nature" commences.

Try as he might to repress it, Glenthorn's *ennui* re-emerges tentatively during his visit to the Ormsby villa, neighbouring his estate. Lady Geraldine, daughter of a local Anglo-Irish landlord, is the central figure of this scene. She gives voice to Edgeworth's own views on the notable differences to be observed between the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and their English counterparts. Lady Geraldine is appalled by the behaviour of her cousin, Lord Craiglethorpe. His pride, vanity, ignorance, and dullness she considers typical of his kind, crossing the channel only to take critical notes of the Irish way of living. Craiglethorpe spends his days walking around the parks writing down everything he sees in Ireland without engaging with the people, an oversight Lady Geraldine thinks a serious mistake. She despises him for coming to Ireland to ridicule rather than help its people, criticising them without making any effort to understand them. Glenthorn's attention, fully directed at Lady Geraldine, is once again drawn to the necessity of a landlord to act responsibly and protectively towards the people on his estate.

The issue of whether (and by what means) to work towards improving the conditions of the rural Irish populace, and the role of education therein, proves the main point of disagreement between McLeod, Glenthorn's agent, and Captain Hardcastle, the agent of the dowager Ormsby. McLeod despises Hardcastle for his way of treating Irish people in New-town-Hardcastle, a town, unsurprisingly, named after himself. Hardcastle is of the view that "the way to ruin the poor of Ireland would be to educate them" (193). He believes that the poor should stick to the spade and the shovel; they should forget about education that only produces scholars, bailiffs, and excisemen who "grow on the worst-disposed" (193). He also finds that the only way to effectively govern Irishmen – already "too quick and smart" – is to deny them the benefits of good schooling. He considers education the privilege of the rich, its sole aim being the creation of a type of gentleman on whom leadership could be bestowed. Hardcastle sees in the example of the Earl of Glenthorn the failure of the English upper-class private education system to breed strong leaders, producing indolent fops instead. Glenthorn's character only confirms for Hardcastle his belief that the creation of a newly educated native Irish class would only serve to amplify tendencies towards indolence already present, making practical governance almost impossible.

Hardcastle's ideas are especially poignant as the Earl of Glenthorn, brought up and schooled in England, turns out to be none other than the son of Elinor. Thus, he is the son of a tenant of the Glenthorn estate, a man of true Irish blood whose ancestors had lived on the estate for generations. The real name of the Earl of Glenthorn is Christy O'Donoghoe, born at approximately the same time as the true heir to the Glenthorn estate. Exchanged as a baby, Christy had enjoyed the comforts of life among the rich in England. Meanwhile, the real heir, a man of Anglo-Irish ascendancy, had been brought up by Elinor as an Irish commoner. With this twist in the novel, Edgeworth sought to demonstrate the significance education and upbringing played in a child's personal and social development, a point central to Rousseau's argument in *Émile*. Christy O'Donoghoe – an Irishman enjoying a gentleman's education in

England – had actually become the very type of Irishman that Hardcastle feared would emerge, were English upper-class education to be extended to the native Irish population.

The Scotsman McLeod argues for a different type of education, one that is more in line with Rousseau's principles. He disagrees strongly with Hardcastle's motto: "keep the Irish common people ignorant, and you keep 'em quiet" (193). In contrast, McLeod bemoans the fact that the rural Irish peasantry "know nothing because they have been taught nothing" (194). He finds ridiculous Hardcastle's fears of the Irish overturning the rule of law in the country when provided with better education. On his own estate, which Glenthorn visits during the course of the novel, McLeod and his wife have created a prospering micro-society. Following Rousseau's proposition that the root of any social progress lies in education, McLeod has founded a new schoolhouse where children are introduced to new ideas and ambitions. He encourages his tenants to become independent farmers, working for their own benefit while also contributing to the well-being of the estate as a whole, rather than remain men willing to accept external governance. The one point on which McLeod and Hardcastle agree is the insufficiency of scholarly education alone for the formation of a well-rounded personality; manual labour is expected in the school built by McLeod. He seriously disagrees with Glenthorn's attempt to solve his tenants' problems with money. McLeod argues as follows: "I *doubt* whether the best way of encouraging the industrious is to give premiums to the idle" (189). Glenthorn has to concede that McLeod is right. In a relatively short space of time the castle is flooded with "crowds of eloquent beggars," while the "industrious tenants grumbled, because no encouragement was given to them" (190). His efforts to rebuild Elinor's hut as a mansion only confirmed for him the view that supplying Irish tenants with goods and money alone would not provide sufficient impetus for them to change their way of living.

Rousseau argued that children should be encouraged to work. De Negroni points out that in the *château à la campagne* Émile learns that work is indispensable to becoming a social being (120). Lemay mentions that at the National Assembly, held on 27 March 1791, Dupont de Nemours referred to Rousseau concerning the acquisition of property solely by means of work (378). This not only demonstrates the influence of Rousseau's ideas at the highest level of post-revolution French politics but also indicates the extent to which work had become sanctified by French politicians of the time. Incorvati explains that the new plan of national education, designed by Michel Lepeletier and read to the Convention by Robespierre on 13 July 1793, drew on Rousseau's notion of the importance of work (392). Robespierre was adamant that Rousseau's ideas had paved the way for the revolution, even though, as Lemay suggests, it achieved more than Rousseau had originally proposed (379).

Louis-René Caradeuc de La Chalotais, Rousseau's contemporary, insisted that a national education system should be created to help soften the rigid class system of eighteenth-century France. In his *Essai d'éducation nationale* of 1763, a year after

the publication of *Émile*, he proposed that education should cultivate good citizens of the state (Pomeau 7). Slowly but steadily public discourse concerning the French education system began to change during the decades preceding the revolution. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards the aim was to create a system that would create responsible citizens of the state capable of handling public, social, and political affairs, instead of trying to modify the private education of the rich or ameliorate the public education of the less wealthy. De Negroni argues that *Émile* was influential in raising issues that resulted in the reconsideration of the education system of eighteenth-century France and ultimately led to its displacement (120-121). Pomeau believes that revolutionaries such as Condorcet and Lakanal succeeded in creating a national system for children from all walks of life (7).

French *éducateurs*, La Chalotais, Rousseau, and Robespierre amongst them, promoted the idea of responsible citizenship as the goal of parenting and education; this idea comes to the fore in the last part of Edgeworth's novel. Having lost his estate to the real Earl of Glenthorn, Christy befriends Lord Y–, a lawyer at the Irish bar and owner of two estates in Ireland. Lord Y– proposes the profession of law and five years of hard labour at the bar to make Christy a man of distinction, more respected by his peers than he had been previously with the old title and his idle lifestyle. "In our country, you know," Lord Y– proudly explains, "the highest offices of the state are open to talents and perseverance; a man of abilities and application cannot fail to secure independence" (304). This is not only another of Edgeworth's subtle criticisms of England, casting a positive light on Ireland, nor is it simply an appraisal of her own father, who had saved their estate from ruin by succeeding in the profession of the law. The last scenes of the novel echo the story of the young aristocrat Rousseau referred to in *Émile*. Rousseau suggested that the idling aristocratic lifestyle ruined a young man's character; hence his proposal that Émile engage in practical employment.

Fired with ambition, Glenthorn's new life as Christy O'Donoghue slowly starts to resemble the life of those living on the McLeod estate he had visited earlier on in the novel. The examples of both the McLeod and the Lord Y– estates, as well as the experiences of his own life, confirm for him the character-forming power of ambition. Christy remembers this awakening in the following passage:

> all the faculties of my soul were awakened: I became active, permanently active. The enchantment of indolence was dissolved and the demon of ennui was cast out forever. […] When I found myself surrounded with books, and reading assiduously day and night, I could scarcely believe in my own identity; I could scarcely imagine that I was the same person, who, but a few months before this time, lolled upon a sofa half the day, and found it an intolerable labour to read or think for half an hour together. (305-306)

Without a title and penniless, no doubt, when called to the bar, he becomes a "plodding man of business, poring over law-books from morning till night" (305). As his powers of observation awaken, his disposition towards the Irish countryside alters:

"the confinement and labour to which I had lately submitted gave value to the pleasures of rest and liberty, and to the freshness of country air, and the beautiful scenes of nature. So true it is, that all our pleasures must be earned before they can be enjoyed" (307).

Lord Y– occasionally takes Christy on visits to his Irish country estates where the young man can see for himself the reward of the tenants' labour: "the neat cottages, the well-cultivated farms, the air of comfort, industry and prosperity, diffused through the lower classes of the people" (307). The nature of Christy's work at the bar is obviously distinguished in class terms from that of the manual labour of the tenants; however, they are united at least in the notion of labour itself, whether mental or material, creating comfort, order, and prosperity. Christy's observation concerning the necessity to work in order to enjoy social benefits recalls Rousseau's concept of a just social system. Condemning eighteenth-century French social structures for allowing the titled aristocracy to reap all the benefits of the social system while withholding them from the working men and the labouring tenants, Rousseau argued that no man was entitled to gain benefits unless he had worked for them.

During the time in which Edgeworth's novel is set, some in France believed that social equality could only be achieved through revolution involving, by necessity, the abolition of titled aristocracy. No such notion is present in Edgeworth's *Ennui*. On the contrary, when Christy visits Lord Y–'s estate he realises that "much may be done by the judicious care and assistance of landlords for their tenants" (307). Christy begins to understand how little he had done for those under his power earlier on in his life, a mistake he intends to put right when reclaiming the Glenthorn estate at the end of the novel. As a result of the real Earl's mismanagement of the estate while Christy was away, the demesne is in ruins. Having been brought up as Elinor's son and having lived amongst the Irish peasantry, the real Earl had gained no experience in managing property of the scale of Glenthorn Castle. In his letter to Christy, which informs the latter of the fire that destroyed the castle, the Earl begs Christy to return and take possession of the estate.

Writing at the time when the formal union of Ireland and Britain was on the legislative agenda, Edgeworth does not disseminate the revolutionary ideas of Robespierre and his followers. Growing up in a family which was affected by the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion, itself modelled on the French revolution of 1789, she placed historical events at the centre of the novel. These events acquire a special significance in the narrative but she chooses to present them neither in terms of glorification nor condemnation. She treats the events of the rebellion merely as a backdrop to revealing the true identity of the Earl of Glenthorn. The truth comes to light when the real Earl is taken into custody for partaking in the rebellion. Elinor is forced to reveal his true identity in order to release the young man from jail. Personalising and, in consequence, marginalising the rebellion, while also weaving the thread of the novel in such a way that the protagonist is to return to Glenthorn Castle by the end, Edge-

worth ultimately endorses the prevailing structure of Irish society. Like Rousseau, and unlike the revolutionaries in France, she believes that social hierarchy should not be upturned but re-modelled so that it would allow its members to fulfil their aims within a general social framework. Shklar and Masters point out that Rousseau himself realised the impossibility of achieving real social equality. Discussing Rousseau's egalitarian and democratic views, Shklar asserts that in the ideal society depicted by Rousseau in his 1762 book *Du contrat social*, Rousseau conceded that "some degree of inequality in wealth and power must be endured" (17-18). Masters maintains that the French philosopher "would not have preferred a direct democracy" (192); the aim of a just civic society, according to him, was to achieve equality under the law between citizens of the state. Rousseau did not consider stripping the aristocracy of their land and their possessions a prerequisite for the creation of an ideal society so much as the creation of a system in which the inequalities of birth were to be balanced off by the equality of men under the law (*Du contrat social* 1: ix).

A century later, during the third Home Rule debate, reflections on the nature of education and its social, economic, and political consequences continued in Ireland. The last section of *Émile*, which describes the young man's tour of Europe to showcase the various forms of government, signifies the extent to which Rousseau considered education on political matters an essential part of the cultivation of the young. The aforementioned debate between Hardcastle and McLeod concerning the probability of the rule of law being upturned by the Irish (were they to be granted a better education system) touches upon this very point. This episode in Edgeworth's book anticipates some of the critical debates shaping public opinion in Ireland a century later around 1910 as the Home Rule crisis loomed. During the nineteenth century, heated political and religious controversy accompanied various educational experiments, including the establishment of the non-denominational Peel's Colleges in all major cities of Ireland, John Henry Newman's Catholic University in Dublin, and John Ruskin's all-girls school in Cork. These experiments differed in form, but consented to the view that the best way to bring about reconciliation in Irish society more peacefully was through the development of systems of education through which modernising and anglicising influences could be disseminated in an authoritative but non-coercive fashion. Strongly in disagreement with these intentions and motivated by a desire to alter disciplinarian methods used in the Catholic schools of the Christian Brothers, Patrick Pearse established St. Enda's College in 1908. Introducing new teaching methods, it was essentially designed to provide alternative schooling for young boys, while its ethos also exuded ideals personified for Pearse by the warrior hero of the Ulster Cycle, Cúchulainn (Sisson 79). As a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Pearse was in favour of military action to achieve independence for Ireland and he used St. Enda's to disseminate "his worship of military discipline" (Sisson 4). He held the view that social change in Ireland could only be achieved by military means, but the educational methods of shaping Irish character could not rely upon the brutalities of corporal punishment.

In marked contrast to Pearse, Horace Plunkett's Co-operative Movement was proposing a more gradual and less militant form of social change. The Movement intended to encourage social development along the lines we encounter in Edgeworth's novel through the character of McLeod, Glenthorn's agent on his Kerry estate. Plunkett's methods were not quite in line with those envisaged by McLeod, but the Raiffeisen scheme of agricultural co-operation recalls the Scotsman's propositions. Besides providing financial aid to ameliorate the working conditions of farmers and to facilitate the marketing of Irish produce, the aspirations of the Movement included the creation of a social context in which farmers' self-confidence could grow. It was hoped that the system would facilitate the education of people living in rural areas in such a way that, were Home Rule to become a reality, they would be able to benefit from the newly opened possibilities. In a similar fashion, although significantly different in its aim of promoting the idea of a Socialist republic, James Connolly noted in the pages of *Shan van Vocht* in 1897 that simply removing the British flag from Dublin Castle would not create a prosperous society unless a proper social system was put in place first (Rumpf & Hepburn 12). The leaders of the Co-operative Movement realised that the Irish needed practical education to achieve a greater overall standard of living. Its aims were not expressly democratic, but the hope was, as Anderson recalls it, to achieve a certain change in the character of Irish farmers. Capable of deciding for themselves, they would cease to submit passively to external governance, thereby concurring with the tenets of Rousseau (Anderson 254). The argument developed in *Co-operation and Nationality* by George Russell, chief ideologist of the Movement, that manual instruction should accompany intellectual cultivation, indicates the endurance of Rousseau's influence on intellectual life in Ireland into the twentieth century. Edgeworth's *Ennui* was a point of departure for a tradition of *Rousseauisme* that would mark Irish social and cultural developments in various and profound ways.

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