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Enunciating Difference: Sydney Owenson's (extra-) National Tale

Aaron Clayton

Published six years after the Act of Union, Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* explores the joining together of England and Ireland. *The Wild Irish Girl*, subtitled 'A National Tale', is for the most part, an epistolary novel, where the protagonist Horatio M–writes all but a few of the 'Introductory Letters'. Excluding Owenson's break from the epistolary form at the end of the text, Horatio maintains control of the narrative so that everything we experience as readers is rendered through his eyes/voice. The story of *The Wild Irish Girl* is fairly simple: Horatio is exiled to his father's estate in Ireland, where he is to remain until his father, the Earl of M–, returns promising to bring with him a wife for Horatio. When Horatio first enters into Ireland, he is bored by the immutability of his father's estate and takes it upon himself to explore the island, making a sort of 'spatial tour' of his stay.

Throughout his wanderings, Horatio must confront his misconceptions of Ireland and its people, reconciling their poverty and destitution with the actions of his Cromwellian ancestors. Recognising his responsibility *for* their situation, Horatio becomes responsible *to* them. His growing love for the land and its people is directly expressed by his love for Glorvina–the only surviving heir of those displaced and defeated by Horatio's ancestors. To resolve his own guilt and responsibility, Horatio intends to marry Glorvina and restore her and her family to their former glory. Ironically, Horatio's father has the same intention, creating an odd incestuous/Oedipal narrative that is resolved when the Earl of M–rescinds his proposal and recommends Horatio and Glorvina to be married. Although Horatio and the reader are unaware of the Earl of M–'s proposal until the close of the novel, the earl courts her in secret throughout the narrative and it is the prince's will that he and Glorvina are to be married.

This brings up two important points, first Glorvina's marriage into the M–family is overdetermined (whether it be the father or the son), and second, as the Earl of M–'s intentions indicate, the marriage was *for* Ireland–to restore what belonged to Ireland. More specifically, the intended marriage of the earl of M–and Glorvina was for Ireland's economic benefit (an economy which

would now be controlled by England). These two points orient Owenson's relationship to the novel and to the Act of Union. Like Glorvina's marriage, the Union between England and Ireland was deemed inevitable. Not only had it already occurred by the time she wrote this text, but also, without suffrage, Owenson had no voice in the Union. She turned to writing *The Wild Irish Girl* as a mode of entering into a discussion of it by performing the Act of Union on her own terms. This places her in the same position as Horatio – although he cannot change the marriage (nor does he seek to), he can, and does, negotiate the terms of the marriage.

Despite the fact that the marriage is for economic purposes, it is also a marriage of love, which at least professes to preserve respect for Glorvina and her Irish difference. In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, E. J. Hobsbawm identifies nation-formation within a historical materialist narrative and cites the unification of nations as motivated by economic progress. With this perception of nation-formation, Hobsbawm makes the argument that a union with a larger nation does not negate the culture and identity of the smaller one. He explains:

> where the supremacy of the state-nationality and the state-language were not an issue, the major nation could cherish and foster the dialects and lesser languages within it, the historic and folkloric traditions of the lesser communities it contained, if only as the proof of the range of colours on its macro-national palette.[1]

Owenson would probably disapprove of Hobsbawm's hierarchy of 'major nations' and 'lesser communities', however, they both recognise union as effectually economic and not necessarily a negation of the smaller nation's culture. Although the Act of Union identifies the nation as the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland', Owenson's marriage narrative indicates she was not completely convinced that Ireland's national identity was secure within the Union, and consequently she used *The Wild Irish Girl* to preserve the possibility of Irish difference. The genre of the national tale accesses a space outside of the English-Irish binary where Owenson negotiated national identity.

Owenson's fears of the negation and objectification of Irish difference are articulated in the opening lines of the novel. In Horatio's first letter, he

[1] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 35.

describes his initial conceptions of the Irish; 'I remember, when I was a boy, meeting somewhere with the quaintly written travels of *Moryson* through Ireland. . . an Irish chieftain and his family were frequently seen seated round their domestic fire in a state of perfect nudity'.[2] Horatio's reductive disclosure not only enunciates his preconceived assumptions of the Irish 'barbarity' as he later describes it, but also indicates where these assumptions originate.[3] Horatio's objectification comes from his childhood from his education in England. Although it is possible that his perception was unique, he adds to this disclosure that his 'early formed opinion. . . has since been nurtured into a *confirmed prejudice*'.[4] Owenson was suggesting that Horatio's education did not correct or expand his perceptions, but concretised them; in Edward Said's terms, England *orientalised* Ireland. Joseph Lew's post-colonial reading of *Wild Irish Girl* draws on Said's theory to demonstrate how Owenson presented Ireland as a colony of England. 'Through a dense and interlocking pattern of oriental allusions and metaphors, Owenson transforms this small island west of England into England's first oriental colony'.[5] In this claim Lew contends that Ireland is orientalised both in the sense that it is tied to the orient through its history, and in the Saidian sense that it is identified and colonised through English colonial discourse.[6] What is important here is that through Horatio, Owenson offered to the reader England's depiction of Ireland as barbaric and singular.[7]

With this in mind, Owenson proceeded to challenge Horatio's reduction of Ireland throughout the novel through his inability to articulate his experience entirely through his letters. During his passage from England to Ireland, Horatio describes the bay of Dublin as 'one of the most splendid spectacles in the scene of picturesque creation I had ever beheld, or indeed ever conceived'.[8] Horatio's use of the term 'picturesque' recalls Said's exploration of

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[2] Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl* in James M. Smith (ed.), *Two Irish National Tales* (New York, 2005), 107.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. Italics are Owensen's

[5] Joseph W. Lew, 'Sydney Owenson and the Fate of Empire', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 39 (1990), 41.

[6] Lew pursues this argument to suggest that Owenson saw all of England's colonies as 'interchangeable'. Ibid., 48.

[7] The term singular is used here, not in the Derridean sense of only being able to be performed once because of continually shifting text/context, but instead in the sense that Ireland is fixed and unchanging; it is able to be identified, tabled and categorised.

[8] Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, 107.

how a picture objectifies a thing *for* the observer.[9] Natasha Tessone offers a similar argument, suggesting that Horatio seeks to appropriate not only Ireland but also Glorvina through a chain of metonyms.[10] However, as he attempts to *picture* the bay of Dublin 'the beautiful prospect which had fascinated our *gaze*, vanished in mists of impenetrable obscurity'.[11] Horatio's attempt to appropriate the beauty of Ireland for himself fails when it withdraws from his sight. No matter how hard he tries to objectify this place, Ireland and its people will always exist just beyond his gaze.

Owenson reinforced this argument in multiple ways. Her novel is a romantic fictional tale, yet she incorporated fact and truth both in the narrative text and in the footnotes, deliberately neglecting to distinguish the two, creating a new form that works with and beyond the romantic novel. In one of her footnotes, Owenson reaffirmed the veracity of a story her protagonist hears, stating, 'Neither the rencontre with, nor the character or story of Murtoch, partakes in the least degree of fiction'.[12] By removing the dates of events and disguising the surnames, Owenson was insinuating that this fiction contains truth and that fiction and truth do not exist in exclusively distinct categories but are at once apart and a part of one another. Emblematic of this conflation, she included a footnote that compares the Castle of Inismore to the Castle of Dunluce, saying, 'Those who have visited the Castle of Dunluce, near the Giants' Causeway, may, perhaps, have some of its striking features in this rude draught of the Castle of Inismore'.[13] Her comparison not only reads like a travelogue, complicating the form of the romantic novel, but it implies that Owenson used Dunluce as the inspiration of her novel, certifying

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[9] In *Orientalism*, Said provides the example of Dante's *Inferno*, which, he argues, 'is at one and the same time [trying] to characterise the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager and actors are *for* Europe, and only for Europe'. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 71–2.

[10] This quotation is drawn from Tessone's statement, 'Nor does the fantasy of possession mobilised by Owenson's ethnographic (self)exhibitions – the desire to possess Owenson/Glorvina/Ireland through the power of the appropriating gaze – weaken because of the virtual nature of the novel's performance. Indeed, once Horatio enters that museum-like region of Ireland his first impulse becomes the desire to possess "my wild territories."' Natasha Tessone, 'Displaying Ireland: Sydney Owenson and the Politics of Spectacular Antiquarianism', *Éire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies*, 37 (2002), 169–86.

[11] Owenson, *Wild Irish Girl*, 108, italics mine. Owenson's appropriate and telling use of 'gaze' calls to mind both Said's and Foucault's panopticon and the privileging of the eye, or observation, as the means to forming 'docile bodies.'

[12] Ibid., 118.

[13] Ibid., 139.

that although this is fictional it still contains truth. Similarly, Heather Braun points to the text's performance of Ireland's plural identity as emblematic of Owenson's attempt to explode these categories of identity, by calling Irish culture a 'mosaic'.[14] In a way, Owenson was performing an act of resistance that disrupts the English colonial determinations, which reduces text to an either/or of fact and fiction.

The character Glorvina furthers this convention of pushing Ireland beyond its determination by English colonial discourse. She embodies a contradictory nature that defies Horatio's description of her. Among one of their many encounters, he observes her charm, noting, 'This elegance of manner, then, must be the pure result of elegance of soul; and if there is a charm in woman. . .it is this refined, celestial, native elegance of soul'.[15] This stream of contradictions does not fit into Horatio's childhood conceptions of the Irish, much less into any sort of simple and objectified definition. Two letters after this already contradictory observation, he attempts to teach Glorvina how to draw, but gives up in frustration when she is unable to sketch a straight line, concluding that drawing 'is. . .too tame a pursuit for the vivacity of her genius'.[16] Somehow Glorvina is able to maintain 'elegant manners', yet is incapable of drawing because of her 'vivacity'. Horatio neglects to account for these contradictions because he cannot, he is unable to.[17]

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[14] Heather Braun, 'The Seductive Masquerade of *The Wild Irish Girl*: Disguising Political Fear in Sydney Owenson's National Tale', *Irish Studies Review*, 13 (2005), 59. Braun explores Owenson's performance of Ireland by examining symbols, references and allusions, demonstrating that 'The Irish are linked, not just to their Phoenician progenitors, but to Egyptians, Israelites and Hindus as well. Their culture is a mosaic, both geographically and historically'. Ibid., 59.

[15] Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, 163.

[16] Ibid., 179.

[17] Tessone argues that Owenson is the Orientalist displaying Ireland for England: 'Her self-display inhabits a dangerously liminal space; in such territory acts of resistance are easily co-optable by the dominant culture.' Tessone, 'Displaying Ireland', 169. However, by doing this Tessone reduces Owenson to simply performing *for* England. Although this performance does not intentionally offer itself up for England/Horatio's possession, Tessone argues that this is exactly what does occur however inadvertently. What Tessone does not consider is that *The Wild Irish Girl* is not simply a performance *for* England, but it is also a performance *of*. By neglecting to acknowledge this, Tessone is unable to recognise that *The Wild Irish Girl* is not just a cultural spectacle, but an enunciation of cultural difference intended to exist alongside other enunciations of Irish identity, such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*. The edition of *The Wild Irish Girl* that I am reading from articulates this by publishing both *Castle Rackrent* and *The Wild Irish Girl* in the same volume under the title *Two Irish National Tales*, suggesting that Irish national identity

Similarly, critics' attempts to identify and concretise metonyms in *The Wild Irish Girl* that might be useful for understanding the text ultimately fail under close examination. Tessone discusses the 'metonymic chain Owenson/Glorvina/Ireland', but these do not work in Owenson's deliberately complicated text. If these metonyms exist at all, they do not function in a simple linear progression as Tessone suggests. Instead they work in pairs, a sort of irreducible doubling. Glorvina represents Ireland's present, only if the Prince represents Ireland's past, both of whom live side-by-side in an a-historical moment. Similarly, the Castle of Inismore serves as a metonym for Ireland's economic status alongside the Earl of M–'s estate (which is also divided between the estate itself and the Lodge); even England is represented by both the Earl of M–and his son Horatio. Trimming down these metonyms into one individual or place is a negation of the text's complexity.

Owenson used all these methods (performing Ireland's beauty, the form of the novel, Glorvina's contradictory nature and the problem of metonyms) to elude reduction, to step beyond but not outside of English colonial discourse. As Owenson saw it, to engage English colonial discourse as Irish is a denial of self, to engage this discourse as English is a denial of Irishness. For Ireland to engage England, as Ireland-for-itself and not Ireland-for-England, Owenson found it necessary to create, as Homi Bhabha terms it *The Location of Culture*, 'a hybrid cultural space' for enunciating difference.[18] This third space 'is in the emergence of the interstices–the overlap and displacement of domains of difference–that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest or cultural value are negotiated'.[19] As English colonial discourse is represented as binary in *The Wild Irish Girl*, there is no room for this hybrid cultural space. England is the imperial coloniser (the self) and Ireland is the colonised (the other). This binary extends through every character of English identity. England is Protestant as opposed to Ireland's Catholicism and paganism. England is Roman, whereas Ireland is Greek and Oriental (Egyptian, Phoenician). Even language is divided into this binary, where England has command of all European/Western languages such as English, French and Latin, in contrast to Ireland's native Gaelic. Owenson clearly elucidated this last binary when Horatio encounters Gaelic for the first time by recounting that 'the old woman addressed me *sans ceremonie*, and in a

is not something that can be reduced to a singular determination, but exists as an enunciated plurality of difference.

[18] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 2005), 11.

[19] Ibid., 2.

language I now heard for the first time'.[20] Horatio can only report his ignorance of the Irish native language by expressing it in a performance of more privileged understanding of European languages. These binaries are exactly what Owenson had to escape from to allow for a negotiation of English and Irish national identity. Consequently, a synthetic unification of these binaries created by the Act of Union is not enough. Owenson needed to ensure that Irish national identity and history was preserved. This necessitates Bhabha's hybrid cultural space that is both non-English and non-Irish, yet still exists on the borders of England and Ireland for the purpose of discussing their relation. Where a synthetic Anglo-Irish identity would negate cultural difference, a hybrid identity would allow for a plurality of difference that emerges out of cultural intermingling.

Owenson articulated this space in several different ways. She did it first through her own identity as a female Anglo-Irish writer. Her birth is shrouded in mystery and even complicated by Owenson's own contradictory assertions concerning it. In Mary Campbell's biography *Lady Morgan: The Life and Times of Sydney Owenson*, she records Owenson's initial claim that '[o]n a rough sea crossing, in a small boat on Christmas Day, 1776, [Jane Owenson] gave birth to their first child, a daughter. Or so it is said, in the much worked-over legend of Lady Morgan'.[21] Campbell observes that later in life Owenson changed the story of her birth. However, what is important here is that around the time Owenson wrote *The Wild Irish Girl* she wanted to see herself as originating between England and Ireland. In her essay 'Acts of Union', Julia Anne Miller argues this point in depth, stating, 'Without full citizenship in 'native' or imperial culture, the Anglo-Irish woman writer is a double agent, uniquely positioned for resistance and/or collaboration with British policy in Ireland.'[22] This unconsciously invokes Said's commentary on the role of the 'intellectual or artist in exile' in *Culture and Imperialism*.[23] By claiming a migrant/exilic origin,

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[20] Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, 115. Italics are Owenson's.

[21] Mary Campbell, *Lady Morgan: The Life and Times of Sydney Owenson* (London, 1998), 17.

[22] Julia Anne Miller, 'Acts of Union: Family Violence and National Courtship in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*' in Kathryn Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (Tuscaloosa, 2000), 17.

[23] Said expresses this clearly saying, 'liberation as an intellectual mission. . .has now shifted from the settled, established and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes and between

Owenson deliberately positioned herself in this in-between space, where she could discuss and engage English colonial discourse without retaining a strictly English or Irish identity.

Just as Owenson oriented herself as a mediator, Horatio performs this same role of mediating for the reader, who is presumably English. Braun recognises that 'Glorvina . . . never speaks directly to us; her words are always filtered through the perspective of another outsider'.[24] Extending Braun's observation a bit further, Ireland, like Glorvina, is never presented to the reader in-itself, but only through Horatio. Yet Horatio is more than just an outsider to Ireland, as an exile he is also now an outsider to England. At one point in the text he even comforts himself in this foreign land by invoking the relationship Greenlanders have with strangers. According to Horatio, although Greenlanders are 'the most gross and savage of mortals', they recognise strangers as equals.[25] This remark severely orientalises both the Greenlanders and the Irish by placing them in comparison and calling them both savage. However, it is valuable, because it demonstrates that even Horatio realises he can enter into Ireland more easily as a stranger than he can as an Englishman. Ina Ferris describes this as the 'gesture of coming nearer' in *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*. She states: 'This gesture, reducing but not eliminating distance, represents the desire behind the narrative address of the national tale: its wish to turn the foreigner into the stranger-who-comes-nearer'.[26] As a stranger/outsider, Horatio is in a position much closer both to the English and the Irish than the English and Irish are to each other.

The national tale functions in much the same way.[27] It does not exist in a fixed space, or within a fixed discourse but in an unsettled space of in-betweenness. Ferris refers to this when she says 'the national tale, as a genre from the sidelines, moves on to the "alien territory" of a dominant discourse

languages.' Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 332. This statement not only articulates Owenson's position as a writer, but is also emblematic of *the Wild Irish Girl* and the national tale as an unfixed text existing between England and Ireland.

[24] Braun, 'The Seductive Masquerade', 34.

[25] Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, 116.

[26] Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge, 2002), 60.

[27] Francesca Lacaita makes an interesting argument that national tales do not in fact deal with nationalism, and shows that these narratives are actually concerned with the identity of hyphenated cultures and the hierarchical relations between these cultures. Francesca Lacaita, 'The Journey of the Encounter: The Politics of the National Tale in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui*' in Alan A. Gilles and Aaron Kelly (eds.), *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture* (Dublin, 2001), 148–54.

so as to wrest a place for its own utterance "against" the apperceptive background of that discourse'.[28] Here we must take leave of Ferris, because, though she is right to argue that the national tale begins on the sidelines, I believe that it remains in this third space, which is distinct from, but in relation to, the dominant discourse. Although Hobsbawm only saw nation-formation as economic and not also in cultural terms, he was right to recognise the possibility of difference in a 'macro-national palette'.[29] Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* demonstrates that the positioning of England and Ireland in the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland' is not fixed, nor should it be determined by a dominant discourse, but is instead articulated by the dialogue of difference from this third space. The possibility of an identity of cultural difference maintained within the unity of the United Kingdom emerges out of this third space of enunciation.

The binary set up by Owenson at the beginning of the text is deliberately problematic, exposing the brutalising reduction of the British colonial narrative. Her uncovering of this violent narrative creates a need for either iterating Irish difference, or at least providing a place for this iteration. *The Wild Irish Girl* performs both by opening a space of in-betweenness for cultural negotiation and occupying that space with a presence that disregards privileging. By neglecting to distinguish fact and truth, by eluding Horatio's 'picturing', by stepping beyond genre, Owenson accomplished this. Her space of enunciation offers a place for negotiating Irish and English difference which maintains and determines the identity of the United Kingdom and unsettles this determination by remaining open for continual re-evaluation.

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[28] Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale*, 49.

[29] Hobsbawm, *Nations*, 35. Although Claire Norris does not acknowledge Hobsbawm or any Marxist critics, her argument serves as an appropriate defence of Hobsbawm economic nationalism. She suggests the Castle of Inismore is a metonym for the economic and social deterioration of the Irish nation. Claire Norris, 'The Big House: Space, Place and Identity in Irish Fiction', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua: A Quarterly Record of Irish Studies*, 8 (2004), 107–21. Following in this vein, Mary Jean Corbett emphasises how important it is for England to recognise the need to 'love' Ireland, getting the most out of its relationship with 'her' by realising who 'she' is and allowing that subjected identity to flourish. Not only does this argument maintain Hobsbawm's hierarchy as it genders the relationship between England and Ireland, but it conceptualises the Union as exclusively economic. Mary Jean Corbett, 'Allegories of Prescription: Engendering Union in *The Wild Irish Girl*', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22 (1998), 92–101.