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Source: *ELH*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (SPRING 2016), pp. 181-209

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24735472>

Accessed: 18-01-2022 06:54 UTC

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MARIA EDGEWORTH'S POETICS OF RENT

BY CASSIDY PICKEN

In an oft-cited passage from an 1834 letter to her brother Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, Maria Edgeworth remarks, "It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a work of fiction," a crisis in representation she compares to her brother's situation as a British civil servant in Punjab.¹ The passage evinces what many readers have discovered in her fiction: an "angry acknowledgement" of Ireland's resistance to literary representation as a result of political unrest.² Less often remarked is that the basis of her comparison between Ireland and India is grounded in something seemingly banal, "the collection of revenues, rents, etc.":

Thank you, my dear brother, for your excellent and to me particularly interesting letter, in which you copied many good observations on the state of your part of India, and the collection of the revenue, rents, etc. Many of your observations on India apply to Ireland. . . . Some of the disputes that you have to settle at Cucherry, and some of the viewings that you record of boundaries, etc., about which there are quarrels, put me in mind of what I am called upon to do here continually in a little way.

Having worked since she was a teenager as the Edgeworthtown agent and accountant, Edgeworth was used to settling quarrels over rents and boundaries—quarrels which had intensified after the O'Connell agitations of the 1820s and the Tithe Wars of the '30s.³ But when Edgeworth describes being "called upon" to participate in these activities, does she speak entirely from the position of a landlord, or does she also refer to her more famous calling as Ireland's premier novelist? Earlier in the same letter, she recalls being asked by Walter Scott "why Pat, who gets forward so well in other countries, is so miserable in his own"; and it was as a novelist rather than as a landlord that she had long searched for an answer.⁴ Taken as a whole, her letter links and confounds her dual occupation of landlord and novelist, suggesting that the activities of "drawing Ireland" and drawing rents might not be entirely unrelated.

If in 1834 Edgeworth found that a global framework of rent collection had made literary representation impossible, her earlier novels made the treatment of Ireland's rental economy a key condition of national literary production. In her Irish Tales *Castle Rackrent* (1801), *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), and *Ormond* (1817), the relationship between landlords and tenants is central to the picture she draws of Irish national culture and to her prescriptions for reform. I would like to take seriously Edgeworth's sense that the possibility of national literature depends on the economic and affective relationships between landlords and tenants—her sense that “in a little way” the task of the novelist resembles that of the imperial landlord. Scholars routinely note that Edgeworth's experience with estate management influenced her fiction, yet this influence is usually understood to have affected her ideological positions rather than her innovative contributions to the novel form. My suggestion is not that Edgeworth's writing betrays her political alignments as a member of the Anglo-Irish landed interest, but that her novels show how Irish literary production itself fits within the transnational networks connecting (and disconnecting) Anglo-Irish owners and Irish producers. Her novels suggest that the production of a national literature depends on repairing relations between a prodigal class of absentee landlords and an abused class of Irish tenants.

Read this way, the Irish Tales develop what I would like to call a poetics of rent: a form of literary making which is not, say, the self-generative creativity of romantic genius, but a form of representation modeled on the economic relations between owners and renters. It is a poetics that adjusts itself to a world in which made things are not simply made, but rendered by their makers to their owners, so that the act of representation occurs in the transaction between persons who are propertied and others who are not. Thinking of poesis as a rendering rather than a making helps to clarify the connection between Edgeworth's representational worry about “draw[ing] Ireland” and the political economy of rent, of rendering to another what is rendered from the land (“The word rent or render, *reditus*, signifies a compensation or return, it being in the nature of an acknowledgement given for the possession of some corporeal inheritance”).⁵ As the Irish Tales' frequent juxtapositions of economic and literary acts of rendering insist, the possibility of such a poetics depends on a relationship of care between renters and owners. Uneven conditions of property must in some sense be stabilized by a sentimental reciprocity; it is just this sentimentality between Irish tenants and absentee landlords which the Irish Tales continually seek to repair and preserve. If the

younger Edgeworth believes (what she later denies) that Ireland can be drawn, it is only because her novels imagine a world in which the drawing of colonial rents can occur under conditions of amity—without transforming the fundamental inequalities of colonial production. I will argue that the narrative and affective structures of Edgeworth's Irish Tales represent an aesthetic reconfiguration of Adam Smith's ideas about the importance of land-rent to commercial exchange and economic development. Particularly in her critique of the culture and economy of Irish absentee landlords, Edgeworth finds in Smith's economic theory of rent the basis for a new poetics of national fiction.

Absentees occupy an important crux of Edgeworth's political thought, one that hinges on the relation between the political and the sentimental. As George Boulukos has argued, her call for Anglo-Irish landlords to reside on their estates was essentially sentimental rather than political in character, rooted in a belief in a paternalist structure of affection between owners and tenants (in contrast, in her treatment of Caribbean plantation ownership in "The Grateful Negro" and *Belinda*, she endorses absentee ownership).⁶ And yet, Edgeworth is anything but indifferent to the geopolitical structures embedding early nineteenth-century Ireland, and her novels are exceedingly detailed in their description of the Big House economy. The bad effects she attributes to absenteeism are often in tension with her underlying faith in *laissez-faire* principles. Her novels attempt to resolve such tensions by turning the material structures of free trade into a medium of local sentimentality, one that begins in the affective relationship between Irish landlords and their tenants. In her artful deployment of the language of "letting" and "leaving be," Edgeworth conscripts the verb-forms of *laissez-faire* economics into the service of a sentimental argument for the return of absentees to their estates. This *laissez-faire* sentimentality is a critical technique of her poetics of rent, allowing her to imagine a liberal reparation of broken attachments between landlords and tenants.

I. THE THEORY OF RENT AND THE GROUNDS OF LAISSEZ-FAIRE

In reading the poetics of rent in Edgeworth's fiction I place her work in the context of an important early nineteenth-century debate concerning the economic nature of rent, land, and the landed interest. It was during these most active years of Edgeworth's career as a novelist that the dominant writers of political economy were working out the details of the "theory of rent." For these authors (including Edgeworth's

friends David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and later Richard Jones), what distinguished the modern landed interest from other property holders was their inherited monopoly over European land, handed down from the days of feudalism. Depending on their perspective, landowners either lived parasitically upon commercial society (as Ricardo suggested) or provided it with a philanthropic body of wealthy consumers (Malthus's position).⁷ The negative image of landowners as a backward set of quasi-feudal monopolists spread dramatically in the French Revolution years, popularized by the Falklands and Tyrrels of Jacobin fiction, and was renewed in the more technical Ricardo-Malthus debates of the 1810s. These debates, rarely discussed by scholars in the humanities, raised questions of critical importance for the global culture of Romanticism. Were landowners an archaic class out of touch with commercial reason, or could the practice of landowning be modernized according to utilitarian norms?⁸ Were agrarian nations such as Ireland and India stuck in a feudal stage of development, or was "Pat[s] . . . miserable" condition the result, precisely, of Ireland's integration within an increasingly global modern economy?

Even in the wake of the New Economic Criticism such questions have largely been left aside.⁹ This scholarship has been more interested in the rise of modern financial instruments, the commodity form, genres of credit and currency, and other major elements of industrial and finance capitalism than in the peculiar economic forms of land, rent, and rural production; in this regard, it has followed the lead of later nineteenth-century political economists who treated land-rent (when they discussed it at all) as a marginal, even antiquated category.⁹ In the early decades of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, the relation between rent and other forms of wealth was a pressing question, and not only because land represented approximately half of England's national capital.¹⁰ Ricardo argued that rising rents were symptomatic of a massive wealth gap between rich and poor: the high proportion of rent-producing capital in England reflected the difficulty of feeding England's poor on the one hand, and the consolidation of wealth among a small elite on the other.¹¹ Ricardo identified a cruel paradox of economic development, suggesting that the more England's stressed agriculture economy declined in productivity, the richer its landowners would become. To the extent that rent was viewed to index income inequality and the accumulation of unproductive wealth, it is inaccurate to see rent and the landed interest as gradually disappearing economic and cultural categories in the course of the nineteenth century. Even as agriculture's share of the domestic

economy declined, England's reliance on foreign trade for its staple crops required the extension of new landed interests throughout the Empire.¹² In her novels' sustained focus on absentee rents, Edgeworth shifts the context of her contemporaries' debates to the colonial world; her work thus offers an opportunity to consider the role played by the landed interest in the expansion and governance of British imperialism at the junctures between its first and second phase; between "formal" and "informal," mercantile and free-trade imperialism.¹³

While Edgeworth was well appraised of her friends' contributions to the rent debates, her own understanding of the political economy of agrarian production owed much more to her early reading of Adam Smith. Her novels' treatments of landholding, rent, and national development offer a series of literary responses to *The Wealth of Nations* quite different from the theoretical responses of Malthus and Ricardo. In considering rent within a colonial context of prevalent absentee ownership, Edgeworth picks up on two related elements of Smith's account of rent that were almost entirely left behind in the nineteenth-century reception of his thought: the place of rent and landowning in his argument for free markets, and in his presentation of the history of European development.

Edgeworth's poetics of rent has an interesting precursor in *The Wealth of Nations*, which already points to a paradoxical relation between making and renting. For while Smith claims that the rent charged in the production of any commodity is one of the three essential determinants of its price (along with the costs of wages and stock), he also regarded rent as profoundly non-productive, serving the personal spending habits of landowners rather than the reinvestment of capital. In this sense, rent represents a non-productive waste at the heart of economic production: and it is this wasteful aspect of rent which Ricardo would develop as one of the major and troubling paradoxes of the modern economy. But unlike Ricardo, Smith sees rent as a valuable source of national wealth despite its non-productivity, claiming that a strong landowning class is decisive to a healthy polity. The central if enigmatic role of rent in his thought is reflected in his claim that the rent paid for use of land "is not at all proportioned to what the landlord may have laid out upon improvement of the land . . . but rather to what the farmer can afford to give."¹⁴ With land, unlike every other commodity discussed in *The Wealth of Nations*, price and value do not match, even under free market conditions. Rent is "naturally a monopoly price"—a strange formulation in a text famous for its denunciation of monopoly ownership, but which

we can make better sense of when we recall the way in which Smith places agriculture and landownership at the foundation of economic development (W, 167).

The Wealth of Nations's claim for the fundamental importance of agriculture is inextricable from its more famous argument in favor of unrestricted trade. Since, for Smith, labor is the foundation of value, since laborers have to eat, and since the price of labor is thus more or less pegged to the price of staple foods, he viewed the cultivation of land as the most secure and productive use of a nation's capital.¹⁵ As recent commentators have emphasized, *The Wealth of Nations* vehemently attacked the policies and practices of the British Empire on the grounds that it impoverished agricultural communities (both in England and in the colonies) for the sake of speculative financial profits.¹⁶ Empire's imperative for commercial expansion "entirely inverted" (W, 412) what he called the "natural course of things" (W, 411) in which economic progress depends on the basis of agrarian culture. This phrase, "the natural course of things," is Smith's rough equivalent to the French Physiocratic philosophers' slogan "*laissez-faire*," a phrase he never used but which clearly informed his writings after his time spent in Paris with François Quesnay and others in the 1760s; it figures in *The Wealth of Nations* as a repeated shorthand for free commercial exchange grounded in agrarian production. More than simply an endorsement of unrestricted trade, the natural course of things represents a modular theory of development in which the gradual sophistication and expansion of trade is built upon the solid foundations of agricultural production.¹⁷ It is true, as virtually all scholarly accounts of the last generation have insisted, that *The Wealth of Nations* is not the proleptic defense of free market capitalism it has been taken to be.¹⁸ But Smith does indeed have a *laissez-faire* theory of commercial society: it just doesn't apply to the world of Western commerce, in his time or in ours. Rather, Smith's vision of an economic circulatory system that, left to itself, would harmonize individual and social interests was based on a social body whose heart is cultivated agricultural land. By diverting excess capital from domestic land into foreign trade, Smith argued, the British Empire had perverted the natural course of things.

While recent readers of Smith have found his critique of the confluence of state power and commerce a unique contribution to an "Enlightenment against Empire," they have passed over Smith's view that Europe's "unnatural and retrograde" (W, 412) development began in a past much older than modern imperialism, in what he dubbed

“the feudal system” of post-Roman Europe.¹⁹ This is important not only because it shows how Smith situates his critique of Empire in the *longue durée* of European development, but because it reveals imperialism’s reproduction of feudal political forms within the global framework of eighteenth-century commerce—a problem, we shall see, that Edgeworth takes up repeatedly. Smith’s theory of rent as a “natural monopoly” is at the core of his account of Europe’s long road out of feudalism.²⁰ On this account, European mercantilism grew out of the feudal world, expanding the militarism and wasteful monopoly forms of early medieval Europe at a global scale. The problem with feudalism, for Smith, was that landowners failed to treat their land as “a means only of subsistence and enjoyment” (W, 413), using it instead as a source of “power and protection” (W, 414). In post-Roman Europe’s perpetual state of war the productivity of land was subordinated to the military function of territory. Since landowners looked upon peasants as a reserve army rather than a revenue source, they exacted from them “little more than a quit rent” (W, 442), “in no respect equivalent to the subsistence which the land afforded” (W, 441): this artificial reduction in rents meant there was no incentive for agricultural improvement, and thus no natural basis for economic development. Only with the new abundance of luxury goods made available by an overgrown foreign trade did landowners discover an incentive to raise their rents. And while he acknowledges the disastrous effects it had on the European peasantry, Smith sees the introduction of modern rent as a “revolution” (W, 447) with the potential to restore the upside-down trajectory of European history to its proper footing: forced to pay rents “above what [their] lands, in the actual state of improvement, could afford,” peasants demanded “that they should be secured in their possession, for such a term of years as might give them time to recover with profit whatever they should lay out in the further improvement of the land . . . hence the origin of long leases” (W, 446). This introduction of long leases and high rents is the turning point from Europe’s feudal past to its commercial present, bringing with it the possibility of normalizing Europe’s backward development: the incentive for landlords to overcharge their tenants is the final turn in a “revolution of the greatest importance,” transforming land from *territory* back into *property*, and thus establishing the conditions for *laissez-faire* agricultural production (W, 447).

But while Smith sees the institution of rent as offering the possibility of a genuinely *laissez-faire* polity grounded in domestic agriculture and manufacturing (he cites “Leeds, Halifax, Sheffield, Birmingham,

and Wolverhampton” as examples of manufacturing towns that have “grown up naturally” as “the offspring of agriculture” [W, 437–38]), the persistent fact of imperialism made this possibility “slow and uncertain” (W, 448). And while Smith’s ire throughout *The Wealth of Nations* is directed principally at the East India Company, it was in the Irish plantation system that the English first experimented with the forms of colonial subjugation that would later be exported throughout the Empire, including the imposition of feudal monopoly landownership.²¹ It is in light of this place of rent in Smith’s thought, at the uneasy historical disjuncture between feudo-imperial sovereignty and *laissez-faire* commerce, that I now propose to read the figuration of rent in Edgeworth’s novels, and especially in her treatment of absentee landlords—a class which certainly treated their lands as “a means of subsistence and enjoyment,” but whose integration within the channels of imperial commerce had done little to improve the condition of Ireland.

II. THE POETICS OF RENT

When Richard Lovell Edgeworth put his daughter Maria in charge of the family estate, he had her read *The Wealth of Nations*. As Anglo-Irish beneficiaries of English conquest, the Edgeworths’ enlightened taste for economic writing stemmed in part from their anxieties about the legitimacy of their property and their desire to redress the negative effects of English conquest in Ireland through agricultural improvement.²² Committed to a moral as much as to a technological revolution of rural life, they regarded the stereotype of the “mere eating, drinking, hunting, shooting, ignorant country squire” as a “nearly extinct” figure, supplanted by the benign self-interest of the modern landlord.²³ In the section “The Country Gentleman” of their jointly authored *Professional Education*, they recommend *The Wealth of Nations* as “the best book to open his ideas, and give him clear views”:

The knowledge of the value and price of land, of the rents which tenants are able to pay, of the causes which affect the rise and fall of rents, is absolutely necessary to a good landlord: he deals in land as tradesmen deal in different commodities; his tenants are his customers; he should therefore know precisely the value of what he is to sell, and of what they are to purchase, that he may neither be a dupe nor an extortioner.²⁴

By directing the landed interest toward a liberalized economy of rural production—in particular, by recommending that landlords learn the

theory of rent—*Professional Education* frames a project of agricultural improvement in line with Smith’s theory of development.

Just as the tendency to overlook the importance of land in *The Wealth of Nations* has led to a simplistic view of Smith’s concept of free trade, attending to the central role of land and rent in Edgeworth’s political thought opens new ways of seeing her contributions to the novel form. In her landmark reading of Edgeworth’s fictions in *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820*, Catherine Gallagher cites the passage just quoted from *Professional Education* to signal a contradiction between Edgeworth’s “productivist” economic principles—her belief in a labor theory of value—and her own experience as an author in a literary marketplace in which credit rather than labor constitutes the basis of value. “If a landlord was merely a businessman dealing in land, was an author merely a businesswoman dealing in texts?,” asks Gallagher; and finding, with Edgeworth, that literature circulates at a value incommensurate with that of the labor of writing (it is worth much less), she finds Edgeworth’s writing to exemplify a “potential conflict between the very notions of economic and literary value.”²⁵

It is certainly true that literature occupies an odd economic position in Edgeworth’s writing, but Gallagher’s claim that this disproves Edgeworth’s productivist principles seems to me mistaken. We can make better sense of literature’s valuation when we recall Edgeworth’s analogy between writing and the collection of rents. As we have seen, the objects Edgeworth recommends to the attention of her country gentleman—“the value and price of land, of the rents which tenants are able to pay”—are, from the perspective of *The Wealth of Nations* at least, not unlike literature in circulating at values relatively autonomous from any productivist standard of value. On Smith’s account, the rent charged by a landlord need not reflect the value of his land—as a monopoly-holder of a certain portion of the land, he charges what he can get away with. Likewise, Edgeworth’s Tales provide many examples of lands leased by tenants at rents incommensurate to their value. If indeed, as Gallagher claims, Edgeworth learned from political economy that literature is not valued at its true cost—“that her product was probably ontologically insufficient, merely epiphenomenal”—then this puts her novels on a similar ontological footing as the rents of the Edgeworthtown estate.²⁶ Rather than seeing literature’s speculative value as pointing an incoherence in Edgeworth’s political economic thought, we might turn to the place of rent in her fiction in order to consider how literary value, like land tenure, is regulated by conditions

of monopoly ownership—“natural” or otherwise. To do so, I will argue, is to consider literature as something not simply made, but made under conditions of dispossession, rendered by the maker to the owner.

It is true, as Gallagher implies, that prices in the eighteenth-century book market rarely corresponded to manufacturing costs. But that does not mean that their valuation was purely a matter of speculative credit. Rather, the mismatch between cost and price was mediated by the monopoly rights of intellectual property holders, whose ability to control supply and inflate prices was protected by law. As William St. Clair has shown, the monopoly rights granted by the Act of Copyright (1709) to copyright holders (typically booksellers, not authors) were drawn from existing laws relating to the ownership and tenure of land.²⁷ Just as a landlord’s rent is drawn regardless of what his tenants are able to produce on his land, the bookseller’s ownership of the ideal, “intellectual” property of a text (and not merely its printed copies) meant his income was relatively autonomous from the actual costs of printing: “[I]n economic terms . . . the income taken was mainly a rent from the text not a profit from the manufacture of the book.”²⁸ The passing of the Act of Union in 1801 extended British Copyright Law to Ireland, an event that in Claire Connelly’s words “all but killed off an Irish publishing industry that was reliant upon markets for cheap reprints in Ireland, Britain, the American colonies and the West Indies.”²⁹ The Act of Union made Irish writers dependant on London publishers in line with centuries-old structures of dependence between Irish labor and English capital. Of course, the Act of Union was also the occasion of Edgeworth’s first Irish Tale, *Castle Rackrent*, and it hovers over her subsequent novels as a critical event in the shaping of national literary culture.

Castle Rackrent explicitly confronts the historical conditions of Irish literary production on the verge of the 1801 Act of Union, linking the economics of writing and the politics of Irish land. In the novel’s preface the fictional Anglo-Irish editor describes how his published chronicle of the Rackrent line, told by the “illiterate old steward” Thady O’Quirk, came to be put to print.³⁰ His remarks reveal the conditions of exchange between editor and storyteller in terms that resonate with the forthcoming tale of the backward administration of Ireland’s plantation economy:

Several years ago he related to the editor the history of the Rackrent family, and it was with some difficulty that he was persuaded to have it committed to writing; however, his feelings for “*the honour of the*

family,” as he expressed himself, prevailed over his habitual laziness, and he at length completed the narrative which is now laid before the public. (R, 6)

In calling attention to the fact that Thady was only “with some difficulty . . . persuaded” to offer his story to the editor for publication, Edgeworth signals the asymmetrical conditions under which both the Tale itself and the national history it encodes have been produced. For the “habitual laziness” the editor accuses in Thady fits within a larger political and ethnographic discourse through which English and Anglo-Irish colonists had long justified their harsh treatment of Irish Catholic labor. But here, importantly, the political antagonisms of the estate are displaced into the realm of literary production; from the relationship of landlord and tenant to that of the editor and author. Placing textual authority and ownership in the hands of the Anglo-Irish editor and authorial power in those of an illiterate member of the Catholic serving class, the preface reveals its own creation to rely on the same socio-cultural formations that characterize Ireland’s rentership economy: the Tale that follows is offered not as a commodity made and sold by one economic actor to another, but as a kind of tribute. The “productivist” conception of literary work Gallagher highlights in Edgeworth’s fiction is thus figured in a larger milieu of political and economic dependency in which Irish things are not simply made, but rendered to their owners.

In suggesting that the act of retelling Irish history reduplicates the same political economic antagonism between owners and makers that characterizes that history, *Castle Rackrent* demands that the work of writing be represented hand-in-hand with the uneven conditions of cultural ownership. The comical misrecognitions between Thady and the editor restage the class divisions of the Ireland estate at the level of literary production. Although Thady is not a tenant on the Rackrent estate—he brags, “I and mine have lived rent-free time out of mind”—the editor repeatedly aligns Thady’s storytelling with peasant labor (R, 9). An early example of this alignment of peasant work and narrative work comes in a footnote to the inscription “Monday Morning” that heads the very beginning of Thady’s tale. According to the editor, the inscription refers to the “prejudice” of Irish workers that “no great undertaking can be auspiciously commenced in Ireland on any morning but *Monday morning*”—not so much a prejudice, we are led to conclude, as a rhetorical strategy to put off work (R, 55). Pointing forward to the Tale’s other instances of peasant resistance

in the form of obsequiousness and deferral, the “Monday morning” inscription marks Thady’s narration not simply as a form of labor, but as labor he’d rather not do. Like the editor’s diagnosis of Thady’s reluctance to give up his tale as a sign of ethnic “laziness,” the novel’s interplay between narratorial and editorial voice dramatizes the tension between ownership and labor at the level of textual production.

In the division of labor that opens *Castle Rackrent*, Irish culture is made by the likes of Thady, but it is not theirs. Like the rents drawn from the land they inhabit but do not own, it is the inheritance of the Anglo-Irish owners represented by the editor. But what is at stake in the transaction between Thady and the editor is not only the ownership of the Tale itself, but the very possibility of a national literature. As the editor writes in concluding his preface, “When Ireland loses her identity by a union with Great Britain, she will look back, with a smile of good-humoured complacency on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her prior existence”; in the wake of the Union, he suggests, Irishness can only be owned, preserved, and shared in the form of an antiquarian curiosity (*R*, 7). This casting of Irish “manners and characters” as antique properties owned by Anglo-Irish proprietors adds a somewhat troubling temporal and political dimension to the book deal cut between the editor and Thady (*R*, 54). In chiding Thady for the quaint notions of obligation and honor that frame his fidelity to the Rackrent family, the editor accuses him of an archaic notion of feudal duty, and perhaps also of a kind of ideological blindness to his own oppression—his ideas of *noblesse oblige* prevent him from seeing the real conditions of his servitude. After all, one way of reading *Castle Rackrent* is as the story of Thady’s dog-like fidelity under the many injuries and insults of his successive masters. But even as the editor dismisses Thady’s notions of honor and obligation as “not . . . of the present age,” his acquisition of the Tale depends on these very same notions; for it is only in observance of them that Thady hands over his rights to his narrative (*R*, 6–7). The editor thinks Thady has mistaken the nature of the deal he has entered into, confusing the language of contract with that of homage. Perhaps, in the language of *Professional Education*, this makes the editor an “extortioner.” But in fact, as the editor also notes, Thady shares with the general body of the Irish tenantry a sophisticated grasp of modern contract law: “[A]lmost every poor man in Ireland, be he farmer, weaver, shopkeeper, or steward, is, beside his other occupations, occasionally a lawyer” (*R*, 63). The effect of Thady’s speech act in his dealings with the editor is to invest the language of modern contract with the affective and political weight of

non-contractual feudal dependency, a form of subordination under the cover of equality that offers a suitable analogy to the real geopolitical situation of post-Union Ireland.

In depicting Anglo-Irish relations through the contract rendered between Thady and the editor, *Castle Rackrent* demands a subtle but important adjustment to how Edgeworth's novels are understood as national allegories. To read Edgeworth through the political economy of rent involves rethinking her use of the Big House as an allegorical figure for Irish nationhood. As many critics have argued, Edgeworth represents the State through the vehicle of the estate.³¹ Irish national history is coded through the managerial regimes and proprietary inheritance of protagonists' landholdings. Typically, by training her protagonists to be benevolent landlords and finding them suitable English brides, Edgeworth allegorizes the liberal development of an Ireland in sympathy with England. To this account of the legal metaphors of land and nation, I would add that her novels' attention to the economics of rent in the concrete space of the Irish estate displaces this form of reading into a more literal register. If, as Mary Jean Corbett and Ina Ferris have suggested, marriage plots allegorize the post-Union relationship between England and Ireland, calculation and collection of rent by a landlord from his tenants offer more than a metaphor for the extractive relationship between these two nations: the mechanisms of absentee rent quite literally were the means through which a great deal of wealth was siphoned from Irish land and let to circulate in English markets. In this way the Irish Tales muddy the boundaries between literal and allegorical representation: the transactions between tenants, middlemen, and landlords that characterize the Big House economy at once allegorize the relationship between England and Ireland, and really are (some of) the media sustaining this geopolitical relationship.

I suggested above that *Castle Rackrent*'s apparently parodic portrayal of Irish feudal manners turns out to say something true about the relations of economic dependency between England and Ireland. In *Ennui*, a similar dialectic between feudal manners and commercial reason is involved in the novel's allegory of national improvement. *Ennui* begins from the Scottish Enlightenment premise that stages of development are unevenly distributed across global space: Ireland in particular is cast as a bastion of ancient feudal manners, heavily contrasted with the protagonist's cosmopolitan life in London. But when Lord Glenthorn returns after a lifetime's absence from London to his Irish estate, it quickly becomes clear that Ireland's so-called feudalism is really

a developed economy of imperial rent, while Glenthorn's tenants' performance of feudal fealty reveals itself as a strategic maneuver to win favor from their lord.

Indebted and debauched as an absentee landlord in London, Glenthorn is persuaded to return to his Irish estate on account of the "feudal power" he will wield there: "Ellinor impressed me with the idea of the sort of feudal power I should hold in my vast territory"; "I was only a lord, as she said, in England; but I could be all as one as a king in Ireland."³² And indeed, when Glenthorn arrives at his estate, he is shocked to discover himself transformed in the image of a medieval lord:

The great effect that my arrival instantaneously produced upon the multitude of servants and dependants, who issued from the castle, gave me an idea of my own consequence beyond any thing which I had ever felt in England. These people seemed "born for my use:" the officious precipitation with which they ran to and fro; the style in which they addressed me; some crying, "Long life to the Earl of Glenthorn!" some blessing me for coming to reign over them; all together gave more the idea of vassals than of tenants, and carried my imagination centuries back to feudal times. (*E*, 190)

Glenthorn's first few hours at his estate are steeped in this pre-modern aura; but as he spends more time there, his tenants' choruses of "*Long may you reign over us*" sound increasingly insincere (*E*, 193). In the scene in which he presides over a courtly hearing to his tenants, their performance of feudal homage reveals itself not so much as an expression of archaic manners but as a rhetorical strategy in pursuit of a long list of contractual demands: they petition him to change or renew current leases and to adjudicate bids for lands whose leases are expiring, to settle disputes between tenants, to appoint police and excisemen, and to make good on "legends of traditional promises" made by "*my lordship's father that was*" (*E*, 193). As in Thady's address to the editor in *Castle Rackrent*, Glenthorn's peasants' performed fealty belies a nuanced understanding of both the modern contractual terms of their position and of the political asymmetry underlying those terms. While the tenants' many complaints relating to leases, proposals, and promises outline a set of legal-commercial concerns at odds with their language of homage, their appeal to the English imagination of a backward peasantry strategically turns Glenthorn's sense of superiority to their own ends. As he says shortly afterward, "I could not have endured the fatigue, if I had not been supported

by the agreeable idea of my own power and consequence; a power seemingly next to despotic" (*E*, 193–94).

Viewed from one angle, Glenthorn's apparent despotism is indeed merely apparent, an "agreeable idea" that effectively holds him "a state-prisoner in [his] own castle by the crowds who came to do [him] homage" (*E*, 194). When he wonders "how these subjects of mine had contrived to go on for so many years my absence," he assumes the character of a nurturing sovereign that is itself an absence, a fiction invented by his "subjects" (*E*, 193). But from a slightly different angle, this construction of sovereignty as absence stands as a striking emblem of the very real state apparatus that links the Glenthorn estate to the larger structure of British imperialism. Set as it is in the years of the United Irishmen's Rebellion, an event that just barely remains in the background, *Ennui* is quite cognizant of the real political violence lurking beneath his tenants' expressions of mock-feudal submission.³³ In its parodic portrayal of Glenthorn's assumed "despotism," *Ennui* explores how apparently annulled forms of feudal sovereignty persist in the unequal conditions of ownership that sustain transnational commerce. If, while living off his rents in London, Glenthorn had never considered himself a ruler, his tenants still evidently see themselves as a people ruled; and while their tributes to him are revealed as strategically performative, their complaints of distress are depicted as real. Finally, if Glenthorn's assumption of sovereignty is parodic, this is because his tenants' subjugation is structural rather than personal: absentee sovereignty is something embedded in colonial relations rather than a characteristic of individual rulers.

Ennui's portrait of Glenthorn's "reign" (*E*, 193) demonstrates the real structure of de-personalized sovereignty that undergirds absentee ownership. It is for this reason that the novel, understood as a national allegory of Irish cultural rebirth, cannot rest satisfied with Glenthorn's mere return to live on his estate. The novel sets out to relieve the distress of the Glenthorn tenants by transforming Glenthorn from an unwitting despot into a good businessman: it does so by training him in political economy. Ashley Cohen has recently argued that Edgeworth's Popular Tales were effectively manuals in global labor management, devising examples of "progressive labor management techniques" to serve as "solution[s] to the empire-wide epidemic of worker disaffection."³⁴ In *Ennui*, a similar end is pursued through a quasi-Socratic dialogue between Glenthorn and his agent the Smithian disciple McLeod, an exchange that serves as a primer in liberal economic development theory. In a long conversation between the two men,

Glenthorn expresses his good intentions to control every aspect of his estate: fixing wages, compelling the purchase of goods made in the village and discouraging imported goods, rewarding childbirth, and more. He is met at every turn by McLeod's *laissez-faire* recommendations against intervention: "It might be doubted whether it would be better to leave them alone" (*E*, 200). The conversation ends with McLeod recommending *The Wealth of Nations* to his boss. As McLeod will later put it, the best method of agricultural improvement is "not doing and not expecting too much at first" (*E*, 220). By the end of the novel, Glenthorn has been won over by the political economic wisdom of his agent.

Ennui narrates a liberal program of national development based on the replacement of local sovereignty (Glenthorn's peasants' claim on his "favour and protection") with the application of free market principles (*E*, 194). Even so, the novel's turn to Smithian policy as a corrective to the wrongs of absenteeism is not entirely straightforward. In Smith's historical account, the improvement of agriculture in feudal Europe occurred when landowners stopped treating their land as territory to be protected, and began to see it instead as a source of rent to be extracted. Far from taking absenteeism and liberal development as opposed political economic logics, we might see absenteeism as the result of free-market principles applied to a world of uneven economic development. The entangled logic of absenteeism and liberal development might be seen in the implied negligence of McLeod's physiocratic language, "it might be . . . better to *leave them alone*": for the language of "leaving" assumes new meaning in a country where a great proportion of property owners have quite literally left, spending their incomes in London while leaving their lands in the control of growing class of agents and middlemen. The difficulty raised at the level of *Ennui*'s national allegory is how to endorse the liberal reform of Ireland while also preventing the desolation of a land left to itself.

Ennui's concluding episodes put McLeod's question whether it would be "better to leave" to the test. When, in the wake of the novel's pivotal *anagnorisis*—Glenthorn's discovery that he was switched as an infant, that he is the son of his nurse, and that the real Earl is Christy the blacksmith, to whom he subsequently hands over his estate and title—the newly named C. O'Donoghoe again vacates his native land, not as an absentee landlord but as a fledging bourgeois individual: "Fired with ambition . . . to distinguish myself among men," "The enchantment of indolence was dissolved, and the demon of ennui was cast out for ever" (*E*, 294). This metamorphosis sets in motion

the events leading to the novel's happy ending, with O'Donoghoe happily married at the head of a new career in law. As for Glenthorn estate itself: in the hands of its new and uneducated proprietor, even McLeod's sound managerial advice does little to curb the decline of the estate, and the novel closes with a letter from Christy announcing it has burned to the ground. Left to itself, Irish land self-destructs. The transfer of absentee to native ownership does not offer the conditions of national rebirth: when absenteeism itself leaves the estate, what it leaves, simply, is absence.

In the political economy of *Ennui*, eradicating absenteeism is not enough to save the tenants of Glenthorn. Rather, the novel's resolution depends on a critical disciplining process, in which Glenthorn's tenants are taught the necessity of their dependence upon the Anglo-Irish. What finally saves Glenthorn estate is Christy's humbled recognition of his own incapacity to manage his property, which leads him willingly to hand back the estate to Glenthorn-cum-O'Donoghoe. Chastened for presuming a capacity as proprietor, Christy concludes his letter to O'Donoghoe by begging him to return. His letter features the same mock-feudal tone of submission we saw on Glenthorn's first arrival to the estate, only now there is no indication of duplicity: "I write this to beg you . . . will take possession of all immediately . . . and come to reign over us again" (*E*, 308). In this final action of the novel, as O'Donoghoe returns to rule Glenthorn as a converted liberal, *laissez-faire* freedom and sovereign rule coincide. The resolution of the novel depends on this final act of voluntary submission, this substitution of willing self-dispossession for the long history of forced Anglo-Irish appropriation.

If Christy's rendering of the estate back into the hands of O'Donoghoe is meant to allegorize Ireland's liberal development, it does so only by marking a concomitant entrenchment of unfreedom among the Irish tenantry. But this unfreedom must first be converted into a structure of fellow feeling. Unlike the Glenthorn tenants' earlier manipulation of the language of submission, Christy's invitation to possess and to rule is a genuine expression of affectionate dependence. In this sense, the affective structure of feudal obligation cheekily deployed early in the novel is only fully activated by O'Donoghoe's new liberal governance of his estate. Rather than overturning the contradictions she has laid bare in the geopolitical framework of absentee ownership, Edgeworth concludes her novel by sentimentalizing this framework, making O'Donoghoe's sovereign rule a structure of liberal affection.

III. LAISSEZ-FAIRE SENTIMENTALITY

McLeod's use of the language of letting and leaving poses a political and historical problem concerning Ireland's amenability to Smith's notion of "the natural course of things." Whereas in Smith the natural progress of commerce depends on a certain removal of sovereignty, Edgeworth presents Irish absenteeism as a form of sovereignty in which territorial governance is constituted by removal. In doing so she offers an important early exploration of the pitfalls of liberal theories of national development: even as she remains essentially a devoted liberal, her novels are surprisingly alert to the submerged coerciveness of political economic theories of reform. *The Absentee* continues and expands *Ennui's* depiction of what we might call the leave-taking of Ireland's colonial mode of production, those forms of expropriation and accumulation that sustain absentee ownership. To do so, *The Absentee* adapts Smith's favorite trope of "the natural course of things" along with its associated rhetoric of "letting" and "leaving be" as a socio-spatial metaphor: her figurative use of the language of leaving is part of the novel's larger presentation of the effects of *laissez-faire* on a culture and landscape left to itself. More than her previous novels, *The Absentee* explores the conjunction (and disjunction) of political economy and sentiment as a problem of colonial space. The novel's solution to this spatial problem, I argue, is to reconfigure Ireland's absentee economy as a *laissez-faire* structure of feeling, one rooted in affective exchange between landlords and tenants. In sentimentalizing these political economic relations, *The Absentee* finally recommends a conservative program in which political economic contradiction is glossed over by paternalist affection. But in doing so, it also points to the insufficiency of liberal political economy taken on its own as a prescription for colonial reform.

Read in its totality as a national allegory, *The Absentee* plots the sentimental repair of Anglo-Irish relations through the Clonbrony family's eventual relocation from London to Ireland. But the specific political stakes of this movement, in terms of the relationship it imagines between economic liberalism and absenteeism, only become clear through Edgeworth's verbal explorations of *letting be* and *leaving be* as everyday figures of speech. This language passes in and out of conversation throughout the novel, and by no means does it consistently reflect political themes. Even where it does not, however, its most ordinary uses are worth noting for the way they cast the social world as a sphere of action that requires nothing more to operate than permission. Passing phrases like "leave me to manage all properly" (Terry

O'Fay), "won't you let us have your judgment" (Lady Clonbrony), or "I should leave things to themselves" (Lady Clonbrony again) participate in the construction of a shared decorum in which engagement in social life involves a kind of active passivity: *letting* things happen rather than *doing* things.³⁵ At key points in the novel, Edgeworth forces our attention on this *laissez-faire* decorum in order to reflect on the forms of blockage that inhibit the proper flow of feeling and action. The physical distance between absentees and their land is one such source of blockage.

In its attempt to re-sentimentalize Irish property relations *The Absentee* contrasts two different uses of the language of letting be. The first use corresponds to the usual interpretation of Smith's argument for free trade: letting individual self-interests compete in an open marketplace will lead to optimal socio-economic results. The concept of liberal individualism as a regulative norm of free-market society was just taking hold of the popular imagination in Edgeworth's lifetime; by the middle of the nineteenth-century, it would (somewhat paradoxically) come to buttress and inform the practices of the British Empire.³⁶ The second use corresponds more closely to Smith's anti-imperialist conception of "the natural course of things," which favors an agricultural foundation of economic development rather than state-backed financial expansion. And it is this Smithian use of *laissez-faire* language that Edgeworth adapts as a rhetoric of local feeling and attachment in her argument for a return of Irish landowners to their estates.

One of the novel's most explicit uses of *laissez-faire* language occurs not in any discussion of land or property, but in Lady Clonbrony and Mrs. Broadhurst's early (and failed) contrivance to marry off their respective children. The episode is important because it depicts a vulgar version of *laissez-faire* sentimentality rooted purely in individual self-interest, divorced from the spatial dynamics Edgeworth (like Smith) sees as constitutive of both economies and communities. The novel's final and successful allegory of union, in which Colambre and Grace Nugent settle on their Irish estate as benevolent resident landlords, sets itself against this earlier and degraded allegory of unrestricted self-interest. Much like the conversation between McLeod and Glenthorn discussed in the previous section, the scenes in which the two matchmakers hatch their plots present a parable of free market versus mercantile economics. Both ladies view their respective children as "object[s] of bargain and sale" (A, 37): the Clonbrons need their son's dowry to stave off bankruptcy, while Mrs. Broadhurst desires "that her daughter should obtain rank" (A, 37). But whereas lady

Clonbrony is clumsily intrusive in her love plotting, Mrs. Broadhurst recommends a lighter touch:

And now, *let them* but see one another in this easy, intimate, kind of way; and you will find, my dear lady Clonbrony, *things will go of their own accord*, all the better for our—minding our cards—and never minding any thing else. I remember, when I was young—but *let that pass—let* the young people see one another, and *manage things their own way—let them be together*—that’s all I say. Ask half the men you are acquainted with why they married, and their answer, if they speak, will be—“because I met miss such-a-one at such a place, and we were continually together.” Propinquity! —Propinquity!—as my father used to say,—And he was married five times, and twice to heiresses. (A, 37–38, emphasis added)

At a superficial level, Smith’s doctrine that “the natural course of things” makes for the best policy is here further naturalized as a courtship stratagem. In Mrs. Broadhurst’s appraisal, sexual desire operates much like a marketplace: marriage, like wealth, is what comes of letting individuals follow their own interests (“minding our cards,” “let [them] manage things their own way”) and making the most of comparative advantages (“Propinquity!”).

However, this *laissez-faire* dimension of Mrs. Broadhurst’s rhetoric is hardly virtuous. Her celebration of a natural economy of sexual desire indexes what the narrator refers to as her “coarseness of mind,” marked by a certain friction against the customary norms of courtship (A, 37). Edgeworth allows the ambivalent semantics of “letting” to strain under Mrs. Broadhurst’s crude naturing of courtship conventions. As her approving example of her father makes clear, Mrs. Broadhurst values marriage in terms of quantity (the more, the better), and this in part explains why her initial use of the word “let” in the sense of *do not interfere* slips into the rather different sense of *don’t inquire to closely* when she almost mentions her own youthful exploits (“let that pass”). Her accumulative approach to matrimony breaches decorum, and so her rhetoric moves from pleading non-intervention to ceding even rights of description: “let them be together—*that’s all I say*.” Playing reluctant interventionist to Mrs. Broadhurst’s coarse liberality, Lady Clonbrony agrees in principle to her friend’s tactics but has difficulty curbing her own impulses to meddle: “I must give him a hint,” she worries from the card table, as the young people discuss the *Arabian Nights* on the sofa; “Well! Well! If they only had some music.” Her accomplice scolds her: “Only *let things go on*, and mind your cards, I beseech you” (A, 41, emphasis added).

Whereas in *Ennui* McLeod's Smithian language of letting be was clearly endorsed in contrast to Glenthorn's various managerial schemes, Mrs. Broadhurst's use of such speech is suspicious. If Lady Clonbrony is artlessly intrusive, Mrs. Broadhurst is too artfully permissive: her *laissez-faire* matchmaking exemplifies narrow self-interest masquerading as something natural. Mrs. Broadhurst's faith in the predictable results of sordid motives proves ill-founded: she "was perfectly right in every point of her reasoning but one. . . . [She] had literally taken it for granted that everything was to depend upon her daughter's inclinations"; "It really never occurred to Mrs. Broadhurst that any man, whom her daughter was the least inclined to favour, could think of anybody else" (A, 41). Whereas McLeod sets the rhetoric of *laissez-faire* in the context of agricultural improvement, Mrs. Broadhurst's belief that the self-interests of others will lead them to predictable results is much closer to the stereotypical version of Smith as a champion of unregulated greed.

In its depiction of the underdevelopment of Irish culture and landscape, *The Absentee* links this negative version of *laissez-faire* with the damages of absentee production. Travelling in disguise to his father's estate, Colambre is struck by "the desolation of the prospect" of his father's property (A, 111). His guide Larry proceeds to tell the history of the estate's decay, placing blame on the estate agent Mr. Garraghty ("old Nick"), himself a kind of intermediary absentee who resides in Dublin while leaving the estate in the hands of his under-agent Dennis.

Lord Clonbrony wrote, and ordered plantations here, time back; and enough was paid to laborers for ditching and planting. And, what next?—Why, what did the under-agent do, but let the goats in through gaps, left o'purpose, to bark the trees, and then the trees was all banished. And next, the cattle was let in trespassing, and winked at, till the land was all poached; and then the land was waste, and cried down: and Saint Dennis wrote up to Dublin to old Nick, and he over to the landlord, how none would take it, or bid anything at all for it: so then it fell to him a cheap bargain. O, the tricks of them! (A, 111)

In euphemizing Clonbrony's agents' sinister methods through the seemingly benign language of letting, Larry ties the logic of *laissez-faire* to the political, economic, and ecological vulnerability of Irish land. Dennis and Garraghty's "tricks" subvert the "let[ting]" of the land from a physiocratic model of improvement into a rentier form of waste: in letting Clonbrony's land go to ruin, they let it to themselves at a bargain. Larry's depiction of the compounding surplus-values

drawn from the land is linked to the Clonbrony's own leave-taking as a London absentee. The physical distance implied in colonial estate management is figured here through the circulation of letters: "Lord Clonbrony wrote"; "Saint Dennis wrote . . . to old Nick, and he over to the landlord." These textual mediations are paired with the extortionate mediations of agents and under-agents: each degree of separation between the landlord and his land opens a potential for profit and a potential for fraud. According to Larry, resident landlords, by the very fact of their residence, prevent the extortions of agencies that otherwise expand and reproduce themselves at their pleasure: "[I]t is where there's no jantleman over these under-agents, as here, they do as they plase" (A, 136). Casting absentee ruin in the language of liberal permissiveness, Larry once again suggests that leaving Irish space to itself is not enough to guarantee improvement: what is needed, he suggests, is the affectionate oversight of resident landlords—a sentimental solution to the spatial destruction of political economic neglect.

The Absentee's presentation of the spatial effects of absentee rents is reflected in its adaptation of the genre of the Celtic tour. Here, again, Edgeworth reflects on how the political economy of the Irish estate affects the conditions of literary representation. The Irish episodes of both *Ennui* and *The Absentee* adapt and subvert generic conventions associated with the Celtic tourist writing of Arthur Young's *Tour of Ireland* and Samuel Johnson's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. Literary critics often turn to *Ennui's* satirical portrayal of the aristocratic travel writer Lord Craiglethorp to show Edgeworth's regionalist dissent against metropolitan writing on Ireland.³⁷ But whereas in *Ennui* the fulcrum of generic critique is the buffoonish vanity of the writer ("Posting from one great man's house to another, what can he see or know of the manners of any rank of people but the gentry, which in England and Ireland is much the same?" [E, 217]), *The Absentee* focuses on the spatial infrastructure of the Tour itself.

As Colambre approaches his father's estate, he discovers that the very roads he is travelling upon are conditioned by the productive arrangements he is seeking to witness. Having noticed the excellent quality of Irish roads, Colambre is surprised when Larry warns, "The bad road's beginning upon us, please your honour" (A, 108). They come upon a party of road workers whom Larry addresses: "How are you, Jem?—How are you, Phil? . . . So you're making up the rent, are you, for St. Dennis?" (A, 109). When Colambre asks what road building has to do with rent, his guide responds:

“[W]hen [these under-agents] have set the land they get reasonable from the head landlords, to poor cratures at a rack-rent, that they can’t live and pay the rent, they say . . . ‘I’ll get you a road to make up the rent:’ that is, plase your honour, the agent gets them a presentement for so many perches of road from the grand jury, at twice the price that would make the road. And tenants are, by this means, as they take the road by contract, at the price given by the county, able to pay all they get by the job, over and above potatoes and salt, back again to the agent, for the arrear on the land. Do I make your honour *sensible*?”

“You make me much more sensible than I ever was before.”
(A, 110)

Colambre is made sensible of the compounding surplus-values that accrue in the corrupt space of the absentee estate: one form of extortion literally paves the way to another. The county’s road contracts, bought by St. Dennis and sold to his tenants at a profit, effect what David Harvey influentially describes as a “spatial fix” of capital, an investment in material infrastructure that resolves (however temporarily) a contradiction between an imperative for high rents and a conflicting imperative for living labor.³⁸ St. Dennis keeps his rack-rent; Jem and Phil keep their livelihood.

Thus, to Colambre’s surprise, the form of his mobility is already shaped by this spatial fix of absentee rent: in journeying “to see and judge how my father’s estates were managed,” he discovers that the very roads he is travelling upon are products of the conditions he sought to investigate (A, 134). This discovery implicates even the text of *The Absentee* insofar as it feeds the expectations of Celtic tourist writing. When Larry insists that Colambre has as much “to do” with the nature of Irish road-making as he does, he suggests that the roaming gaze of the metropolitan tourist (and by extension, the reader of tourist writing) is just as much involved in the corruption of absentee space as any Irish driver:

“[B]ut is it not cheating the county?”

“Well, and suppose,” replied Larry, “is not it all for my good, and yours too, plase your honour?”

“My good!” said lord Colambre, startled. “What have I to do with it?”

“Haven’t you to do with the roads as well as me, when you’re travelling upon them, plase your honour?” (A, 110)

Importantly, Larry does not condemn the rent-seeking organization of Irish road-building as a whole, but only its most pernicious exploiters:

“And sure, they’d never be got made at all, if they weren’t made this way; and it’s the best way in the wide world, and the finest roads we have” (A, 110).

The didactic message of this conversation is worth underlining, because it demonstrates how Edgeworth’s acute awareness of the potential damages of liberal development is managed through a sentimentalization of rentership relations. *The Absentee* supports the roundabout mode of Irish road construction even as she starkly reveals its susceptibility to abuse. Edgeworth would have been extremely well informed on the subject of road building. Only one year after the publication of *The Absentee*, her father would publish *An Essay on the Construction of Roads and Carriages* (1813), complete with a two-hundred-page appendix excerpting and indexing the reports of parliamentary committees on English roads and turnpikes. Like her father, Edgeworth recommends neither the direct maintenance of public roads by local parishes nor the privatization of roads by turnpike trusts (the two systems of road maintenance in eighteenth-century England), although Colambre seems at least initially to intuit that something like the turnpike system would be cheaper for the county.³⁹ But he is readily won over to Larry’s position that the combined oversight of “*rael jantlem[en]* resident in the country” will prevent the jobbing of “journeymen jantlemen” such as St. Dennis (A, 110). Left in the hands of individual self-interests, Irish roads lead straight to decay: they can only be preserved by the physical presence of a sympathetic landed interest.

I have argued that *The Absentee*’s depiction of absenteeism’s effects on the landscape offers something like a proto-critique of the rhetoric of *laissez-faire* development. It does this by shifting perspective from those who leave to those who are left: from the London absentees depicted early in the novel to the inhabitants of their wasted native estates. As I suggested earlier, this critique is measured against a more positive use of the language of *laissez-faire*; and this reinvestment of feeling within the rhetoric of letting be in turn depends upon a perspectival and spatial shift to the landscape of agricultural production. In the scene that emblemizes this shift, Colambre persuades his mother to return to live on the family’s Irish estate, noting that in a single season of reckless spending they had consumed “the greater part of [their] timbre, the growth of a century” (A, 154). He then diverts his mother’s attention to another object: “But let the trees go; I think more of your tenants—of those left under the tyranny of a bad agent, at the expense, of every comfort, every hope they have

enjoyed!" (A, 154). Turning lady Clonbrony's attention to "those left," those living on the remainder of her own consumption, Colambre attempts to reorient the residual space of the absentee estate as a ground of communal affection.

The Clonbrony's return to Ireland reverses the unidirectional flow of absentee rents that characterized the novel's earlier play on the rhetoric of leaving: what is to be left is no longer the colonial estate but rather the metropolitan center. As Colambre, his father, and Grace Nugent implore Lady Clonbrony to "leave all the nonsense of high life," they reconfigure this rhetoric in a way that suggests an ingrained propensity to simple rural culture (A, 154). Irish estate life is the natural order the family will, naturally, return to—if only Lady Clonbrony will let them. "Let me see you once more among your natural friends, beloved, respected happy!" pleads Colambre; "'O return! Let us return home!' cried Miss Nugent, with a voice of great emotion. 'Return, let us return home!'" (A, 155). Invoking Lady Clonbrony's long forgotten attachments, the family casts the economic relationship between landlord and tenant as a natural framework of paternal affection. "Well, since it must be so, let us go," Lady Clonbrony finally accedes: "And now, since we are to go . . . let us go immediately" (A, 155). The decision to return turns on a recognition of its inevitability. Like Smith's view of commerce as a circulatory system which the wiles of the mercantile state can derange but not stop, the Clonbrony's deep ties to Ireland must return them to their natural place: "it must be so."

In the end, Lady Clonbrony's unnatural aversion to Ireland is overturned, and the family is pulled into the current of the natural course of things. In the long run, the imploring family implies, there will be no stopping their residence on their estate: they only need to be *let* to do what they naturally would do anyway. But this inevitability depends on Colambre's sentimental depiction of his mother's forgotten attachments to her Irish tenants. Having re-established this relationship in the novel's final chapter, the narrator concludes with her own performative act of leave-taking: "[W]e leave our hero, returning to his native country" (A, 199). Implicitly marking a tension between Colambre's return to his estate and her own gesture of removal, the narrator's final leaving-to-be takes assurance in the natural order of things her fiction has labored to restore.

Of course, this natural order, too, is a fiction. Ireland's long history of dispossession would not be fixed by the easing of commercial restrictions or the renewal of paternalist affection. In the face of the agrarian unrest of the 1830s, Edgeworth would come to disavow the political

motives of her earlier novels: “Really though I wrote a story called *The Absentee* I come to think it is but reasonable that a country be rendered fit to live in before we complain of more Absentees.”⁴⁰ We have seen how this desire to render an unlivable world livable took the shape of a sentimental rehabilitation of the political antagonisms latent in the structure of Irish colonial rent. The Irish Tales’ project of sentimental reform was a fiction never to be realized, but Edgeworth’s attempt to find in the political economy of rent a sustaining structure of feeling succeeds in drawing a post-Union Ireland at the limits of liberal theories of development.

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NOTES

¹ Maria Edgeworth to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, 14 February 1834, in *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, 2 vol., ed. Augustus J. C. Hare (London: Edward Arnold, 1895), 2:550.

² Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 81. See also Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002); Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 2; and Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 176.

³ Marilyn Butler describes how the increasing political independence of Irish peasants in the 1830s led Edgeworth to “wave[r] in the sympathy for the lower orders which had previously been one of her motives for writing about Ireland” (*Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 452).

⁴ Maria Edgeworth to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, 14 February 1834, in *Letters*, 2:550.

⁵ Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), 2:41.

⁶ George Boulukos, “Maria Edgeworth’s ‘Grateful Negro’ and the Sentimental Argument for Slavery,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23 (1999): 21.

⁷ In the preface to his major work of 1817, David Ricardo cites Malthus’s “Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent” (1815) and Edward West’s “Essay on the Application of Capital to Land” (1810) for independently discovering “the true doctrine of rent” (preface to *The Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation*, ed. Piero Sraffa [Cambridge: Univ. Press for the Royal Economic Society, 1951], 5). The rudiments of this doctrine—that the worst cultivated land in a region yields ordinary rates of profit and no rent, and that the rent of better land is determined by the excess produce it yields—had already been suggested in James Anderson’s *Enquiry into the Nature of the Corn Laws: With a View to the New Corn-Bill Proposed for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mundell, 1777).

⁸ See *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, ed. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁹ Karl Marx’s long discussion of land-rent in the third volume of *Capital* is the exception that proves the rule. See *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 of

3 (New York: Penguin, 1991). On the other hand, if rent gradually lost its place as a special economic category, it was partly because the so-called marginal revolution of mid-Victorian political economy generalized the theory of rent to apply to all economic phenomena, not just land. William Stanley Jevons claimed his theory that value is determined by scarcity rather than labor derived “great probability from [its] close resemblance to the Theory of Rent, as it has been accepted by English writers for nearly a century” (*The Theory of Political Economy* [London: MacMillan, 1871], 198). Similarly, Carl Menger took earlier writers to task for treating land’s non-conformity to the labor theory of value as an exception to “general laws,” rather than as “evidence of the need for reforming the science” (*Principles of Economics*, trans. Peter G. Klein [Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007], 165–66). Perhaps, if rent ceased to be contentious for political economy, it was because marginalism’s subjectivization of value incorporated the theory of rent into the perceptual apparatus of economic science. For a cultural history of political economy’s transition from productivist to marginalist theories of value, see Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Thomas Piketty compares the composition of English and French national capital between housing, agricultural land, and other forms of capital from 1700 to the present in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), 113–39. Problematically, Piketty’s numbers for English and French national capital do not include colonial revenues.

¹¹ Ricardo writes, “The rise of rent is always the effect of the increasing wealth of the country, and of the difficulty of providing food for its augmenting population. It is a symptom, but it is never the cause of wealth; for wealth often increases most rapidly while rent is either stationary, or decreases. Rent increases most rapidly, as the disposable land decreases in its productive powers” (*Principles*, 77).

¹² The establishment of land property laws in the colonies modeled on European customs was already well under way in the eighteenth century. See Ranajit Guha’s classic *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996).

¹³ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson influentially distinguish formal and informal imperialism in “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review*, 6.1 (1953): 1–15.

¹⁴ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 167. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated W.

¹⁵ Smith thus claims, “The capital . . . that is acquired to any country by commerce and manufactures is all a very precarious and uncertain possession till some part of it has been secured and realized in the cultivation and improvement of its lands” (W, 452).

¹⁶ Giovanni Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2007) reads Smith’s theory of the “natural course of things” as a corrective to imperialist and capitalist over-accumulation (57–68). On Smith as an anti-imperialist, see also Siraj Ahmed, *The Stillbirth of Capital: Enlightenment Writing and Colonial India* (Stanford: Univ. of Stanford Press, 2012), 106–127 and Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in England and France* (Princeton: Univ. of Princeton, 2006), 25–100.

¹⁷ Smith writes, “The cultivation and improvement of the country, therefore, which affords subsistence, must, necessarily, be prior to the increase of the town, which furnishes only the means of conveniency and luxury” (W, 408).

¹⁸ See especially Donald Winch, *Adam Smith’s Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978) and Emma Rothschild, *Economic*

Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002).

¹⁹ On Smith's coinage of "the feudal system" and "feudal government," see Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 7–8. On Enlightenment anti-imperialism, see Ahmed, 1–24 and Sankar Mathu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

²⁰ Smith's claim that "The rent of land ... is naturally a monopoly price" (*W*, 167) was an important point of disagreement in the rent debates. Malthus agreed with Smith that rent is a "natural monopoly;" Ricardo disagreed. See Malthus, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Progress of Rent, and the Principles by Which it is Regulated* (London: John Murray, and J. Johnson, 1815), 15; and Ricardo, *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*, 404–5.

²¹ For a recent account of early modern Ireland in the history of British imperial practice, see Jane H. Ohlmeyer, "A Laboratory for Empire?: Early Modern Ireland and English Imperialism," in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 26–60.

²² Richard Lovell Edgeworth writes in 1792, "I am now possessed of . . . landed property by the right of Conquest—[T]hat right has hitherto been sufficient for the common purposes & common sense of mankind—upon [what] foundation is another question" (quoted in Butler, 112). Quoting these lines, Catherine Gallagher puts forward the view that Edgeworth's concern with the legitimacy of his property "probably reinforced his commitment to the productivist ideology he frequently used to justify his tenure" (*Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994], 288). On the problem of legitimacy in Edgeworth, see also Sara L. Maurer, "Disowning to Own: Maria Edgeworth and the Illegitimacy of National Ownership," *Criticism*, 44.4 (2002): 363–88.

²³ Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vol. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 5:40.

²⁴ R. L. Edgeworth, esq., *Essays on Professional Education* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), 257–58.

²⁵ Gallagher, 260, 263.

²⁶ Gallagher, 267.

²⁷ William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 52.

²⁸ St. Clair, 30.

²⁹ Claire Connelly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790–1829* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 6.

³⁰ Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent, The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vol. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 1:6. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *R*.

³¹ See Sara L. Maurer, 365–66 and Esther Wohlgenut, "Maria Edgeworth and the Question of National Identity," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 39 (1999): 645–58. The marriage plot plays a crucial role in what Corbett has called "allegories of Union" (in her book of that title) and what Ferris has qualified as "the problem of 'incomplete Union'" (15). See Corbett, *Allegories of Union* and "Public Affections and Familiar Politics: Burke, Edgeworth, and the 'Common Naturalization' of Great Britain," *ELH* 61 (1994): 877–97. For a different account of the narratological problems and possibilities framed by eighteenth-century estate law, see Sandra MacPherson's "Rent to Own; or What's Entailed in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Representations* 82 (2003): 1–23.

³² Maria Edgeworth, *Ennui*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vol. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 1:175. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated E.

³³ Glenthorn is “shocked by the summary proceedings of [his] neighbors” against suspected insurrectionists (E, 244).

³⁴ Ashley L. Cohen, “Wage Slavery, Oriental Despotism, and Global Labor Management in Maria Edgeworth’s Popular Tales,” *The Eighteenth-Century* 55.2–3 (2014): 196.

³⁵ Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vol. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 5:51, 14, 55. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated A. According to Eric Lindstrom, the split rhetoric of “leave be” and “let there be” is a major crux of Romantic theories of poetic creation and political sovereignty (*Romantic Fiat: Demystification and Enchantment in Romantic Poetry* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], 1–22 and throughout).

³⁶ Uday Singh Mehta notes that the term “liberalism” came into popular usage in 1818. See his study of the confluence of nineteenth-century imperialism and liberal thought *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 11. On nineteenth-century free-trade imperialism see Gallagher and Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” and Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade, and Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970). Literary scholarship has only recently begun to explore the aesthetic dimensions of early free trade imperialism. For two exemplary studies, see Rebecca Cole Heinowitz, *Spanish America and British Romanticism 1777–1826: Rewriting Conquest* (Edinburgh: Univ. of Edinburgh Press, 2010) and Ayşe Çelikkol, *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-Faire, and the Global Nineteenth-Century* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

³⁷ See Miranda Burgess, “The National Tale and Allied Genres, 1770s–1840s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 48–52.

³⁸ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), esp. 413–35.

³⁹ R. L. Edgeworth recommends the establishment of a general body in London “with extensive powers” that would employ a permanent staff of engineers to assess and improve all national roads (*An Essay on the Construction of Roads and Carriages* [London: J. Johnson & Co, 1813], 10). He also dismisses the alleged benefits of the privatized turnpike system, pointing to pervasive corruption and speculation among the turnpike trusts. Like Larry, R. L. Edgeworth attributes the better state of Irish roads to the resident landlords who oversee their construction and maintenance. See also William Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England, 1663–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), 14–29.

⁴⁰ Maria Edgeworth to Fanny Wilson, 4 January 1839, quoted in Butler, 453. Butler neatly sums up Edgeworth’s change of heart: “In the 1830s she was caught in the classic position of a moderate liberal in times of revolution” (453).