

THE ROMANTIC NATIONAL  
TALE AND THE  
QUESTION OF IRELAND

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## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
Introduction: the awkward space of Union		i
1 Civic travels: the Irish tour and the new United Kingdom		18
2 Public address: the national tale and the pragmatics of sympathy		46
3 Female agents: rewriting the national heroine in Morgan's later fiction		74
4 The shudder of history: Irish Gothic and ruin writing		102
5 Agitated bodies: the Emancipation debate and novels of insurgency in the 1820s		127
<i>Notes</i>		155
<i>Bibliography</i>		185
<i>Index</i>		201

CHAPTER I

*Civic travels: the Irish tour and the  
new United Kingdom*

“What can possess you to go to Ireland?” exclaimed a friend of mine, “where the hedges are lined with pikes and blunderbusses?”

John Carr *The Stranger in Ireland* (1806)

The roads in Ireland, even those called post-roads, are often in the very worst line of direction, and not unfrequently go zig-zag and round about, when there is no occasion for it.

The Reverend James Hall *Tour Through Ireland* (1813)

To travel in Ireland in the early nineteenth century, these British tour-texts suggest, was not to know quite where you were. It was not just the propensity of Irish roads to become parodies of the very idea of a road, as in the Reverend Hall’s account, nor the way in which boundary lines threatened to turn into screens for those bent on erasing those very lines, as in John Carr’s not entirely serious evocation of the standard English motif of Irish insurgency.<sup>1</sup> The problem was one of specifying the location. Officially, British visitors were simply moving about in another part of the single polity known as the United Kingdom, but Ireland continued to feel (as it long had in English eyes) remote and peculiar. Its incorporation into Great Britain in 1801 thus generated for the English the disconcerting situation nicely summed up by Seamus Deane: “They see Ireland in conventional terms as a foreign place much given to rebellion; whereas in fact it is home.”<sup>2</sup> As Deane’s formulation suggests, Ireland was disquieting less because it was “strange” (its strangeness was a well-established trope in British discourse) than because its radical ambiguity after Union – the foreign place that was also home – estranged home space itself. The question of Ireland kept intruding on British culture in this period, for the alterity of Ireland now lay inside that culture, and the problems it raised were precisely those that bore on notions of the interior, the home, the domestic. This is not to downplay the urgency of its status as an “internal colony” nor to suggest that

other internal colonies like Scotland did not destabilize home space, but it is to argue that the “incomplete Union” of the United Kingdom exerted a particular and powerful pressure on metropolitan discourse in the period, complicating the colonial paradigm and rewriting some of the basic oppositions (internal and external, literary and political, public and private) structuring the Romantic literary field.<sup>3</sup>

A liberal and English genre (even when written by Scots or Anglo-Irish), the Irish tour makes especially clear the degree to which Ireland was understood in post-Union British public discourse as a domestic and civic issue.<sup>4</sup> The “safety of empire” at stake in the tour was primarily that of the “home” empire of the United Kingdom, so that in a very real sense what the post-Union Irish tour sought to domesticate (to bring home) was not so much the Irish as the unhomely Union itself. This process certainly involved domesticating the Irish; indeed, the Union itself was an attempt to pacify Ireland so as to secure the internal boundaries of Britain against the threat of both external (French) enemies and internal (Irish and English) agitators. But from the start it was mired in contradictions and shot through with instabilities, so that it came into being, as the previous chapter suggested, not so much as a solution as a new problem. To understand and help resolve this problem was the civic ambition of the early nineteenth-century Irish tour, a genre practiced mostly by male writers drawn from the professional and gentry classes: landowners, clergymen, educationists, social reformers, and lawyers, along with a sprinkling of leisured gentlemen and professional travel writers.<sup>5</sup> Motivated by its civic concern, the tour was anxious in particular both to conciliate the Irish and to convince English policy makers to remove the discriminatory political and economic measures that obstructed full union. “The union of Ireland will ever want a cordial cement,” declared John Carr, striking the generic keynote, “as long as political distinctions that degrade her are permitted to exist.”<sup>6</sup> Advocating legislative measures like Catholic emancipation and economic measures like free trade or currency reform, the tour typically framed the Irish problem in terms inherited from the rationality of the Enlightenment, looking to its analytic power for ways to extricate the Union from its dilemma. “The union has certainly created a demand for a statistical, economical, moral and political view of Ireland,” wrote Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth in their review of Carr’s Irish travels for the *Edinburgh Review*, and they sum up the liberal ideology informing the tour in calling for “clear explanation” of the continuing obstacles to “progress” and “improvement,” as well as for remedies in line with “sound policy and practical humanity.”<sup>7</sup>

But if Ireland enters public discourse in the Romantic period as something to be explained – “an *explicandum*,” as Joep Leerssen puts it<sup>8</sup> – the Irish tour, like the national tale that takes off from it, seeks to complete Union by forging ties not only of reason but of sentiment as well. Carr wants a “cordial cement,” while an English agriculturalist and former member of parliament named J. C. Curwen sets out to persuade English readers “that nothing can so effectually promote the moral and political improvement of Ireland, and so essentially serve the first and best interests of both contries [*sic*], as a cordial co-operation and union of sentiment.”<sup>9</sup> The interest in sentiment and cordiality testifies to the awareness among commentators on Ireland that the Union, while generally regarded as a rational and practical measure for both England and Ireland, was at the same time a murkier and less rational affair. Thus the Reverend James Hall, Scottish chaplain to the earl of Caithness, adds to his account of his 1813 tour an appendix on the Union, declaring his conviction that it will ultimately benefit Ireland but conceding that at the present moment it has thrown “a general damp and discontent over the sister-kingdom.”<sup>10</sup> To account for this dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction that seems to him especially puzzling when found among those outside the political order, he mounts an argument that both individuals and nations are driven by a law of “self-continuation” from which emerges a “consciousness of identity.” This consciousness inevitably resists what will bring about its own destruction, so that when a great state proposes an “amalgamation” with a small nation, the small nation instinctively feels “an alarm for self-preservation” and a reluctance to “be swallowed up as a stream in the ocean.”<sup>11</sup>

It is not only Ireland Hall has in mind, as becomes apparent when he cites the earlier experience of Scotland at the moment of its union with England. Working with a nationalist model that pits the laws of economic reason against those of national identity, he argues that union with England might bring with it the prospect of greater wealth and comfort for the Scots but at the price of their own identity: “There would be no more genuine Scotsmen.”<sup>12</sup> Impelled by this model, he provides a rare reading of the 1798 Irish rebellion as a revolutionary expression of separatist nationalist energies rather than seeing it (as do most travel-texts) as a civil war fuelled by long-standing internal grievances. By now having alarmed even himself, Hall pulls up short: “Having made these observations, it may be proper for me to add that I am very far from thinking that the Union was not a measure advantageous to both countries.”<sup>13</sup>

Katie Trumpener has argued that travel writing on Ireland in the Romantic period typically crossed the rational discourse of the

Enlightenment survey with a counter-strain deriving from a “bardic nationalism” developed in the Celtic peripheries, and Hall’s is an unusually explicit and conflicted instance of the pressure of those peripheries on an essentially metropolitan genre.<sup>14</sup> But it points as well to the way in which the Union itself operated as a site of unease in the tour. The desirability of achieving Union was rarely in doubt but neither was the fact that it had not yet been achieved. Moreover, the unsavoury matrix of its passage (rebellion and repression, bribery, deliberately misleading language in relation to the Catholic situation, and so forth) combined with the continuing sense of unrest that I have been calling “incomplete Union” to make the whole subject not just unsettled but unsettling.<sup>15</sup> Anxiety hovers around the term, and its appearance in a travel-text is always highly charged. Even a solid statistician like the English agricultural authority Edward Wakefield moves into excess when Union comes into view. Defending the measure in the preface to *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political* (1812), he goes into overdrive: “Connexion with Great Britain – union – inseparable union – the being one and the same empire – one and the same people – to have the same interests – throwing the broad parental shield of the British monarchy over the farthest parts of Ireland, and over the meanest of her inhabitants, can alone promote the general and individual welfare of both countries.” What makes this noteworthy is not just the nervous insistence of the prose but the fact that the previous page includes an odd footnote in which Wakefield retells an anecdote from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. Johnson tells an Irish gentleman: “Do not make an union with us, Sir; we should unite with you only to rob you. We should have robbed the Scotch, if they had had any thing of which we could have robbed them.”<sup>16</sup> Wakefield may simply enjoy the dig at the Scots, but the unresolved juxtaposition of an England that “robs” and an England that acts as “parental shield” renders the act of political amalgamation literally dubious, and establishes the Union as an event inhabited by ambiguity and incoherence.

Other travelers were more direct. “But how can we call this a union between two countries,” one writer asks, “where one lost every thing, and the other gave up nothing[?]”<sup>17</sup> “Nearly twenty years of an union has produced nothing,” asserts John Bernard Trotter, an eccentric Anglo-Irish Whig who had served as private secretary to Charles James Fox. Blaming both the revered Fox and less-revered Pitt for failure to “consolidate” the empire, Trotter presents Ireland as an explosive force waiting for the opportunity to throw off English power. So long as England holds “the great body of the population unredressed in Ireland,” he warns, “so long must expence [*sic*], danger, and uncertainty for the future, continue.”<sup>18</sup>

Trotter's warning, while clearly tactical, is not simply so; it registers as well an acute sense of the fragility of English power in Ireland, a sense apparent throughout his text. He keeps reiterating that the English have failed in their rule, declaring that "they have made little impression on the language, religion, or mind of the country. Princes, lord-deputies, and armies, have laboured to change them but fruitlessly."<sup>19</sup> Trotter thus calls attention to the obvious but often overlooked point that the equilibrating narratives of empire (such as travel writing) are posited on an initial disequilibrium, on a dissonance that dislodges the confidence of imperial discourse in the first place. The post-Union Irish tour is imbued with the recognition on the part of early nineteenth-century travelers that Ireland testified as much to the failure as to the reach of British power. As they observed the barracks studding the Irish landscape or recalled the origin of picturesque ruins in the cannons of conquest, they recorded the force of an order that had refused to take. And never far in the background was the awareness of recent and perhaps future insurrection.

In their review of John Carr's tour, the Edgeworths castigated travel writers for avoiding the topic of Irish violence, censuring "well-meaning timid persons" who forbore speaking "upon what are called *dangerous subjects*; as if the danger were created by inquiring into the means of defence; or as if it could be dissipated by pretending that it does not exist."<sup>20</sup> But in a sense their charge misses the point. It is true that Carr struck a characteristic note when he told readers in the preface to *The Stranger in Ireland* that he would avoid inflammatory topics: "Upon those unsettled subjects which have too long excited *party animosity*, I have advanced nothing which can have the remotest tendency to inflame the public mind." As here, the Irish tour typically presented itself as a cool genre in a hot zone. All the same, tour-texts are shot through with apprehension, and the 1798 rebellion, which surfaces on several occasions in Carr's own text, remains a point of constant *irritation*, neither fully confronted nor yet completely banished. So the author of a short and very odd tour published in 1806, who hastens to inspect the site of Robert Emmet's 1803 rebellion on arrival in Dublin and remains in a high state of apprehension throughout his journey, makes sure to register the rebel status of towns through which he passes. Carlow is "the seat of rebellion," for example, while Leighlin-bridge is "a nest of rebels."<sup>21</sup> And in a surreal episode that looks forward to the ironic scenes of arrest featuring the beleaguered hero of the Waverley Novels, he finds himself arrested on the suspicion of being a French spy. Less self-dramatizing but equally aware of moving through a volatile landscape, the Reverend Hall suspects that



the people of county Kildare will be “ready to rebel again, whenever a favourable opportunity occurs,” and notes that in Wexford, the flashpoint of rebellion, he had difficulty persuading interlocutors “that it would not be the duty of the people to rebel, so soon as an opportunity offered.” On his visit to the Edgeworths he commends their enlightened social ways (they invite both Catholic priests and Presbyterian ministers to dinner) but also their post-1798 fortifications, “so that there was no fear of being attacked, either by the windows or doors, after these were secured in the evening.”<sup>22</sup> As late as twenty years after the rebellion, Curwen articulates the fear never far from the surface of English writing: “Though every thing at present has a tranquil appearance, the calm is not, I fear, accompanied with any confidence in its permanence. Every idle rumor [*sic*] spreads widely, and indicates an apprehension that revolt may again produce its devastating effects.”<sup>23</sup>

Wakefield’s well-respected *Account of Ireland* provides an especially telling example of how the question of insurrection, stemming from the trauma of 1798, troubles the early nineteenth-century tour. A two-volume work modelled on Arthur Young’s foundational *A Tour in Ireland* (1780), most of its chapters are devoted to expected matters like “Rural Economy,” “Fuel,” “Fisheries,” “Money and Circulating Medium,” “Weights and Measures,” and so forth. But the work includes as well a less predictable chapter titled “Rebellion in 1798: French Invasion in 1798.” Wakefield enters upon the subject of the rebellion with great reluctance. Only the apprehension that “the torch of discord is not wholly extinct,” he says, has induced him to write of a subject he would prefer to see “consigned to eternal oblivion” (II: 358). His hope is that once the source of danger has been pointed out, “measures of prudence” will be put in place to prevent or counteract “calamity,” measures which include the kinds of policies (Catholic emancipation, encouragement of industry, mitigation of “evils”) favored by liberal thought of the time. All this is unexceptionable. What makes Wakefield’s account notable is what it does not do. He himself, it turns out, was in Ireland during 1798, traveling the very terrain of rebellion as he crossed from Waterford to Sligo. There, he tells us, he saw “many houses in ruins” and “wretched inhabitants . . . wandering about in an extreme state of desolation” (II: 359). But his actual narrative of the events of 1798 not only operates at a high level of generality but draws heavily on textual sources like parliamentary reports and memoirs rather than on his own experience. Having raised the possibility of a certain narration, that is, he then refuses it, telling the reader that although he is “well acquainted” with the sufferings of

many individuals and has visited the locations of the conflict, he will go into few details: "I seek not to revive tales of woe, to add to the pangs of misery; many still suffer by horrid recollections, and I should be the last person to tear the bandage from the unhealed wound, when it could not produce a beneficial effect" (II: 358). Representation in both literary and political senses thus remains a charged and painful issue. Wakefield withdraws from the one to give the other a chance, hoping as he does so that the body of the Irish nation is not endemically diseased but simply, as his metaphor has it, suffering a temporary wound.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the last lines of his work deliver a pointed warning to the British public:

A whole people cannot causelessly be impelled to brave the mouth of the cannon, or rush upon the bayonet against their rulers; and when such events do take place, and when the voice of complaint does arise from a whole people, let their governors attend to the awful warning, and remember, that it will not be necessary to seek a heavenly-gifted interpreter to expound the HAND-WRITING UPON THE WALL! (II: 838).

Writing barely a generation after Arthur Young, Wakefield testifies to the way in which the Irish tour after 1798 replaced the benevolent assurance of the late eighteenth-century tour with a decidedly more agitated and nervous note, reflecting its own specific genesis in a moment of British crisis rather than British confidence. In the early years of the nineteenth century, British liberals tended to be at once ashamed and fearful when it came to Ireland; indeed, even the venerable *Gentleman's Magazine* (no liberal beacon) confessed in 1819 that "the very mention of Ireland conjures up a host of painful recollections and forebodings, from which the mind . . . would willingly escape, seeking refuge from the trouble of devising a present remedy, in the passive hope that future events may, somehow or other, avert the threatened evil."<sup>25</sup> The post-Union Irish tour marks an important faltering in the self-possession of British civic discourse in the period. Its confidence by no means collapsed, but poise was tenuous and the generic mood typically one of discomfort. Witness, for example, a suggestive sequence in one of the few Irish tours written by a woman in the period: Anne Plumptre's account of why she did not see the ruins of Cashel in her *Narrative of a Residence in Ireland During the Summer of 1814, and That of 1815* (1817).

In the summer of 1815, Plumptre (an Englishwoman of letters traveling around Ireland) set out from Limerick to see the famed Rock of Cashel.<sup>26</sup> On the way there, she learned that the Mail had been robbed two nights earlier just past Cashel in an attack that left one soldier dead.

Interestingly, what most disconcerts Plumptre about this news is not the violence of the robbery but the fact that its goal was arms, not money. On hearing this detail, she experienced an emotion she cannot articulate (“a feeling not to be described”), although she is certain it was not fear for her own safety. “I know not what it was,” she says, “but my mind was wholly untuned to thinking of anything else” (*Narrative*, 311). Indeed, she was so possessed by this indeterminate emotion that she passed the celebrated monastic ruin without stopping. Now, when she looks back on that day, she cannot quite account for her refusal to stop: “At present my feelings upon this occasion seem strange to me, they seemed so in a few hours after, but at the moment they were irresistible. I have often asked myself since, why I did not see the ruins of Cashel, – I could never answer the question satisfactorily” (312). When her driver pointed out the place where the robbery actually occurred, she was relieved to have passed it, and reports that she “tried to think of the thing no more” (312). But “the thing” lingers in her text for a while longer, as she again thinks back to her journey that day. Then she abruptly dismisses the whole episode: “But enough of it” (313).

With this imperative, Plumptre expels the unsettling moment from her travel-text. But unease persists. Not long after the narration of the Cashel journey, she turns to the general question of the relationship of the Irish and the English, striking a keynote of the post-Union tour when she asserts her belief that the vast majority of Irish wish “to attach themselves warmly to the English” and would even be willing to forget “humiliations” attendant on the Union if only they could feel that it was indeed “an *union*” (337). Plumptre bases this belief on her personal experience during her travels (“my own reception”), but it soon becomes apparent that this is a belief determinedly maintained in the face of a barely suppressed distrust: “I must either think that I saw nothing but hypocrites, or believe that the flattering attentions I experienced were of the heart, not merely of the head; for worlds I would not think the one; I must believe the other; – I must believe that the Irish are a kind and warm-hearted people” (337). The reiterated imperatives (“I must believe”) defend against the memory of recent “troubles and commotions,” and Plumptre reinforces their import by arguing that only a trifling minority of “troubled spirits” has ever been involved in such commotions. Somewhat surprisingly, she turns to the fierce outbreak of 1798 to support her claim: “This was particularly manifest in the rebellion of 1798; had it not been a very, very small minority of the nation who were engaged in it, never would it have been so easily subdued” (337). Choosing to highlight the brevity

rather than ferocity of the rebellion, she once again offers a resolutely optimistic reading. But no amount of adjectival insistence (“very, very small minority”) can quite conjure “the thing” away.

This sequence offers an unusually explicit rendition of English discomfort in Ireland as a subsurface phenomenon experienced in – and as – a scene of agitation. Plumptre comes up against something that impinges on her consciousness but cannot be readily absorbed (named) by it, and her whole encounter is cast in terms of energies just below the surface that make surfaces themselves hard to read. At least two meanings of agitation cross in this scene: the traveler herself is disturbed and shaken, internally agitated, at unexpectedly running across agitation in the external, political sense of an ongoing activity seeking to dissolve social equilibrium. Under the influence of this agitation, Plumptre is literally pushed off her course and loses her bearings. Ireland itself splits in two, and she finds herself distracted from the ancient ruins of picturesque rural Ireland by a glimpse of militant rural Ireland and a potentially violent future with its very different kind of ruin. In this compounded moment on the road to Cashel, at once highly concrete and curiously abstract (she only hears about the incident), two forms of Ireland and two forms of history collide. Plumptre, importantly, shuts out both: “But enough of it.” Turning and re-turning the topic of Ireland only to reach an impasse, her discomfited consciousness is emblematic of the liberal English anxiety that entered into the public discourse on Ireland in the years after Union and largely determined its contours in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

#### BAFFLED REASON

Even as the romantic Irish tour was imbued with affective modalities like discomfort and drew on sentimental and antiquarian traditions, however, its official self-understanding highlighted rational affiliations. The genre as a whole participates in the well-known separation of the literary and the political in the period, but it does so from the less familiar side of the duality, at least so far as recent literary history is concerned. In this instance, it is the political that expels the literary rather than the other way around, and it does so to save, precisely, the notion of public genres. Emerging out of late Enlightenment discourses of political economy, moral philosophy, and historiography, the post-Union tour aligned itself with high-minded genres of public and political concern rather than with aesthetic and touristic genres associated with the

private pleasures linked to the sentimental and the picturesque. The line between these two modalities of travel was not, of course, very firmly drawn, and in writerly practice they tended to overlap. Even the earnest agrarian Arthur Young, who pioneered the modern Irish tour, peppered his massive survey of rural habits and agricultural statistics with appreciative and stylized accounts of “views” and “prospects.” He himself traveled to Killarney and other tourist areas, and public-minded visitors after 1800 likewise followed a well-established itinerary organized around standard sights and must-see spots.

While this itinerary certainly yielded its share of aesthetic travel-texts by painters and leisured gentlemen under titles like *A Picturesque Tour Through Ireland, Illustrated With Numerous Coloured Views of the Most Interesting Scenery* (a volume published by Dennis Sullivan in 1824), the distinctive inflection of the Irish tour as travel writing derived from the long-standing, intensely fraught relationship between England and Ireland which discouraged casual picturesque rambles or proto-ethnographic surveys governed by simple “curiosity.” From the outset, as John P. Harrington has pointed out, English writing on Ireland had been governed by the persistent theme of the country as “a problem.”<sup>27</sup> All the more so after the Union when British visitors, no matter their specific allegiances and interests, shared a sense of Ireland as a *predicament* for England. The country was never simply a place to be traversed, one land among other lands, so that to write on Ireland, as Anne Plumptre observed, was not at all the same kind of thing as to write on a country like France, for Ireland was a nation that stood in relation to England as a “sister.”<sup>28</sup>

This “sister,” however, continued to remain strangely unfamiliar despite the outpouring of public writing on Ireland since the late 1790s, and traveler after traveler evokes the motif of Ireland as the close but unknown place. “[T]hough the name of Ireland is most familiar to our ears,” George Cooper remarks in the preface to his *Letters on the Irish Nation* (1800), “yet both the kingdom and its inhabitants have been as little described as if the Atlantic had flowed between us”;<sup>29</sup> almost twenty years later, Curwen remarks that he is visiting a country that “although almost within our view, and daily in our contemplation, is as little known to me, comparatively speaking, as if it were an island in the remotest part of the globe.”<sup>30</sup> Motivated by the desire to direct significant public attention to Ireland – to promote a serious writing and serious reading linked to political power – the early nineteenth-century tour generally defined seriousness (as do Cooper and Curwen) as a function of distance from the literary and aesthetic. So Cooper, for example, reports

that the “state of the Irish kingdom had been the great subject of public discussion, ever since its Legislative Union with Great Britain was proposed” by way of explaining his own focus on matters like government, religion, and commerce rather than on the natural scenery that attracts “admirers of picturesque beauty.” Establishing his authorial gravitas, he adds: “I could not persuade myself to fill my letters with descriptions of that sort.”<sup>31</sup> A similar note, this time more clearly directed at readers, is struck by James Glassford, a Scottish Commissioner of Inquiry into the State of Education in Ireland, who refuses to apologize for the formal imperfections of his text on the grounds that he does not seek “to cater to the literary epicure.”<sup>32</sup>

Such disclaimers of the literary were of course a long-standing convention in travel writing. What distinguishes the post-Union Irish tour is that their purpose was less to establish the cognitive authority of the text (as in Arthur Young’s late Enlightenment Irish tour or, more generally, in travels of exploration) than to guarantee the ethical authority of the writer as citizen and to emphasize the urgent, problematic status of Ireland. “Accustomed as I have been to have my time and attention directed to useful pursuits,” writes the former politician John Curwen, “I should be quite out of my element on a tour exclusively devoted to pleasurable objects.”<sup>33</sup> Eschewing the irresponsibility of personal pleasures, the practitioners of the Irish tour identify themselves with the responsible time of a life lived in public, civic space. Thus an expatriate Protestant Irish surgeon named Thomas Reid refuses to “waste” time on picturesque descriptions: “As my visit to Ireland is purely with a view to inquire into some of the evils, both moral and physical, under which, unhappily, it has too long been permitted to labour, I shall not waste my own or my reader’s time by attempting to depict the scenery of every place through which I may have occasion to pass.”<sup>34</sup> The generic distinction secured by such moves is underwritten by (and in turn underwrites) distinctions of gender and national character. “Waste” belongs to the effeminacy of literary pursuits and to Ireland itself, whose own wastefulness (“luxuriantly fertile” yet desperately poor) must be countered by a masculine and British discursive reason.

The *Edinburgh Review* makes the point in its review of Wakefield’s *Account of Ireland*:

But we should be ashamed to waste our time in literary criticism on an account of Ireland . . . published at a moment when that country is the great hinge, on which the whole of our domestic policy turns, and when the speedy as well as the general prevalence of right opinions concerning it may materially affect

the safety of Empire. Whoever at such a moment could measure his attention to this work by its literary merit, must have lost every thing masculine in his understanding, by the process which refined his taste.<sup>35</sup>

Pitting “taste” against “understanding” in this way, the review not only confirms public discourse as the sober space of responsible masculine reason but places it in direct opposition to the distracting and self-indulgent realm of a feminized literary discussion and refinement. This distracting realm of the literary, it should be stressed, appears as *internal* to the male critic and writer (rather like Ireland in the United Kingdom), a potential within male sensibility against which he must defend. James Chandler has noted that the potency of political-historical genres like “the state” (to which travel writing is related) meant that they were fiercely guarded as a male prerogative in the period.<sup>36</sup> The passage from the *Edinburgh Review* suggests further that this called not only for the exclusion of women but for the expulsion from within male discourse of the ambiguity that allows words to be both rational and literary at the same time.

But when it came to Ireland, lines were difficult to draw, not least those of public genres. Travels concerned themselves with “the state” of Ireland, as is apparent in titles such as *A Brief Inquiry into the Present State of Agriculture in the Southern Part of Ireland*, *A Sketch of the State of Ireland, Past and Present*, *Observations on the State of Ireland*, and others. Importantly, the “state” of Ireland at once fit into and eluded the genre of the state, usefully defined by Chandler in his investigation of Romantic historicism. Chandler identifies the genre of the state primarily with the annualized representations of the state of the nation that began to emerge in the eighteenth century (as in the series of *Annual Registers*), and he understands it as a genre that actively participates in the making of national history. The civic tour is more strictly political in that it intervenes in the field of public policy and is only secondarily interested in the construction of national narrative, but the two activities are interdependent, especially in the question of Ireland and the United Kingdom when arguments about national identity buttressed the campaign for specific policies. Both, however, were stymied by the fact of the Irish; hence the need to investigate their state in an analytic performance deploying the even chronological grid Chandler calls “the historian’s code” and the notion of uneven development articulated by the philosophical history of the Scottish Enlightenment. Such analysis reveals a telling difference. The state of the (British) nation has a date – “England in 1819,” for instance – and this places it within modern history, but the “state of Ireland” typically does not. Suggestively, what corresponds to something like “England in

1819" is not "Ireland in 1819" but "A Journey to Ireland in 1819." Dates pertain to the traveling subject, the visitor from the metropolis, whose journey is usually carefully and prominently dated.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the traveled subject, Ireland, has no date, generally placed in the notorious ethnographic present with its colonialist denial of coevalness.<sup>38</sup> It is no accident that when the modern editor of the odd 1806 Irish tour noted above reprinted the text in 1980, he also changed the title from *Journal of a Tour in Ireland &c. &c. performed in August 1804* to *Ireland in 1804*.<sup>39</sup>

For early nineteenth-century commentators, however, the problem was precisely how to relate Ireland to 1804 or 1822 or, more generally, to the sense of their own contemporaneity, a sense largely secured by a confidence in their own historicity. Ireland's relation to modern history and to the modernity of Great Britain was the pressing issue and the main puzzle. Ethnographic tropes defined the Irish as outside modern historical time altogether, and travel-texts not only routinely relegated the Irish to "savage" and "barbarous" states of society but described them in the exact same words used by much earlier commentators on Ireland such as Edmund Spenser or (in the conflation characteristic of the comparative analytics of the period) in the even earlier and paradigmatic words of a writer like Tacitus. So an observer like Cooper could declare: "The natives of that country . . . still remain the same rude barbarians that our earliest accounts describe them. I shall have little difficulty in describing this character, as it may be depicted [*sic*] in the same few words with that of all nations who have been in a state of ignorance and barbarity."<sup>40</sup> Most travelers were rather more observant, but they nonetheless tended to place the Irish and their history within repetitive and reproductive modes of time, which did not appear to accumulate in any significant way but simply to return. Ireland thus did not operate in the historical temporality that would allow it to move into the genre of the state, but at the same time it had to be related to that temporality. Herein lay the challenge to the civic tour and the reason for its constant recourse to the coordinating categories of Enlightenment history or to the heartening example of Scotland, generally understood as having made the successful move from pre-modern to modern soon after entering into union with England.

But Ireland confounded in a way that Scotland in general did not. "We all know," declared the *British Review* in 1818, "that Ireland presents an aggregate of paradoxes and anomalies both civil and moral."<sup>41</sup> What "we all know" was reiterated again and again in the reviews and the travel-texts, as the situation of Ireland remained intractable even in light of the most benevolent prescriptions of enlightened reason. Ireland, that is (to



draw on another of Chandler's useful genres), was also "a case." A case, as Chandler emphasizes, is an anomaly that presents a problem for a general scheme or system; because it does so, it makes central the act of deliberation: weighing, pondering, balancing. Indeed, Chandler writes, the case is "the very form of 'deliberation'."<sup>42</sup> To bring Ireland into the dated historical time of the state (hence to make it a member of the modern nation) first of all required determining the nature of the case. But no matter how much the case of Ireland was deliberated, it yielded neither a precise definition in terms of existing norms ("this is the case") nor a new framework for deliberation (an altering of the case). Rather, it hovered in the indistinct zone between these two possibilities, so that travelers who went out to make sense of the anomaly typically ended up simply reiterating the fact of anomaly. "The state of Ireland is an anomaly among nations," declared Reid, and summed up the standard definition of its case: "Although possessing almost every requisite for making a nation prosperous and happy, still the people are poor though industrious; discontented amidst abundant natural advantages; starving, though surrounded by plenty; and, whilst other nations are progressing in the arts and blessings of civilization, this alone seems to retrograde in every useful improvement."<sup>43</sup> The very reiteration of the point of anomaly, however, underscores that Ireland was never *simply* an anomaly within British order. It was more "peculiar" (a favourite epithet of the period), a peculiarity encapsulated in the ambiguous designation offered by one travel-text when it referred to the "strange anomalous condition" of the country.<sup>44</sup> To be anomalous is to come under the rule of the law even if only to overturn the law (a case to be determined); to be strange is to lie outside the purview of the law. But to be a strange anomaly is to inhabit ambiguity itself (to be at once inside and outside) and hence to disquiet rather than to engage (either in positive or negative terms) the logic of the law.

In its ambiguity, then, Ireland operated less as "other" than as heterogeneous to modern English (i.e., British) reason. This does not mean that the Irish did not continue to be subjected to the familiar move of othering that had shaped English discourse on Ireland from the Elizabethan period onward. The construction of the "wild Irish" persisted, generally re-accentuated through Enlightenment motifs of exoticism and sentimentalism. But the repositioning of the country placed new pressure on the metropolitan subjectivity accustomed to sustaining itself through the axiological distinction of self/other. Moved within national space, the strange anomaly of Ireland became the figure of dissolution itself, a negativity hollowing out the kinds of binary distinctions on which national

identity was founded. Over and over again in the travel literature, Ireland is cast in terms of overflow and surplus, manifesting itself as an energy that precedes differentiation and eludes structuration. As puzzled British eyes encountered crowded spaces of intimacy, witnessed the spillover of the faithful at Catholic chapels, or observed baffling limit-rituals like Gaelic funerals, Ireland came to seem the very primal scene of Confusion. In this space, history could run backwards, lines of force be reversed. Wakefield, for instance, fears that Ireland presents a regressive sphere threatening to undo the work of civil government, which is to prevent a return to “a state of nature.” Although he claims that any absolute return to such a state is impossible in this enlightened age, he is nonetheless alarmed that events in France and Ireland have demonstrated that a people may “nearly return” to that state.<sup>45</sup>

Behind such anxieties lay not only the memory of recent insurrections but the pressure of the Irish population, whose extremely rapid rate of growth from 1760 to 1840 placed a strain on both the Irish and English economies. Commentator after commentator reports on the large families, crowded cabins, and alarming dependence of the poor on the potato. Debate raged over whether Ireland served to confirm or, by contrast, to refute Malthus’ notorious argument in his *Essay on Population* that population tended to outstrip the means of subsistence unless checked by disaster or (preferably) moral reserve, and Malthus himself entered the debate, beginning with a review of Thomas Newenham’s *A Statistical and Historical Inquiry into the Progress and Magnitude of the Population of Ireland* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808.<sup>46</sup> Suggestively for my purposes, Malthus frames his review as an argument for Catholic emancipation (a point that would not be lost on Daniel O’Connell), and he pursues a line of thought that, somewhat unexpectedly, foregrounds political as much as economic conditions. He expands the argument about reliance on the potato, for example, beyond the usual claims about fertile soil and ease of cultivation to urge that “the political degradation of the Irish poor powerfully contributed to make them adopt potatoes as their principal food” (352). The political argument meshes with the economic argument – a more advanced and just polity develops habits and tastes that retard population – but Malthus’ emphasis in this article falls less on the “natural” economic and moral checks that were his hallmark (although these are certainly strongly argued) than on the indirect but crucial role of political legislation. It does so because Malthus’ real interest is in Ireland as a member of the United Kingdom, a kingdom of whose population it now formed “above a fourth part” (336). Ireland’s population, he notes,

had “more than quadrupled” in the last hundred years, and it now formed a “rapidly increasing physical force” that urgently required conciliation: “Every year the proportion of the Catholics to the Protestants is rapidly augmenting, – a circumstance which might be contemplated without fear if they were once conciliated; but, till that time arrives, must be regarded with increasing apprehension, as daily diminishing the prospect of a cordial and permanent union between the two countries” (337, 349).<sup>47</sup>

While Malthus’ argument about the need to conciliate this large population is rational enough, he casts the population-fact itself in language that exceeds the rational. Over and over again Malthus stresses “astonishment” and a sense of the “extraordinary” when he contemplates Ireland. In part he is heightening his theory’s claim to explanatory power, but there is more to it than that. His imagination reels at the thought of the “prodigious mass of people” the potato-based culture will produce before the economy regulates itself. At the current rate of increase, he predicts, Ireland will contain “*twenty millions* of people in the course of the present century,” and again he warns that this huge physical force will not remain united to Great Britain “without sharing, in every respect, the full benefits of its constitution” (343).<sup>48</sup> Quite literally, the margins of the nation begin to press on the center, assuming a frightening gigantism, and the population-fact begins to exceed its strictly economic dimensions. If some Irish tours preferred to confine it to a rational and managerial problem of “unprofitable exuberance,”<sup>49</sup> for others it resonated more obscurely: “The greatness of the population in so small a space as Ireland,” mused Trotter, “gives it an extraordinary energy, which, polypus like, seems uninjured by partial cutting, and defies all attempts to chain and enervate it.”<sup>50</sup> Ungraspable and uncontrollable, this “extraordinary energy,” blocked in one direction, simply runs in another. And running *inside* British power, it disturbs its placement, generating an effect (or affect) that recalls Kristeva’s account of the abject as “[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules.”<sup>51</sup> Pushed out from here, it shifts over there, operating in the motility of the semiotic space of pre-objects and pre-subjects theorized by Kristeva. And as potent unformedness, it threatens less opposition to than erosion of identity and system.

There is an intriguing and emblematic moment of such erosion in Carr’s *The Stranger in Ireland* when the normally jovial Carr, visiting the fabled tourist spot of Killarney, enters Muckcross Abbey and is horrified to discover recently interred bodies in coffins whose planks have begun to start. The corpses emit a “putrid effluvia,” and Carr quickly makes the

rational humanitarian case for shutting up the burial spot as a danger to public health. But what fascinates – and unsettles – is the weird contrast that constitutes the gothic scene: “Contrast renders doubly horrible the ghastly contemplation of human dissolution, tainting the surrounding air with pestilence, in a spot which nature has enriched with a profusion of romantic beauty.”<sup>52</sup> Horror surfaces not simply because of the presence of death in the heart of “romantic beauty” but because of the way in which the corpses make manifest at the level of the body the fragility and permeability we must forget in order to live as subjects. Kristeva, defining the corpse as the abject, a literal crumbling of signification, stresses that it does not (like a flat encephalograph) “*signify* death,” something one can accept or understand. “No,” she writes, “as in true theatre . . . refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.”<sup>53</sup> Amid the seeping coffins, the English traveler finds himself at the border of his condition as a living being (and not just as a national subject), and he immediately pulls back, invoking the rule of the proper: the call to regulate the boundaries that will put a cessation to this unseemly mingling of death in life, and allow him once more to *be* on the other side of a clearly demarcated line.

Such dissolution of lines and boundaries through overflow unhinges, if only temporarily, the Irish tour. It may do so more or less lightly, as in the comically solemn complaint by the Reverend Hall that although “there are acts of parliament against pigs running in the streets, yet this act is daily and hourly broken in Cork, where pigs are sometimes so numerous, that you are not only often impeded in your walking by them, but sometimes likely to be overturned.”<sup>54</sup> Or it may surface more seriously, as in Thomas Reid’s graphic account of cottiers preparing to plant potatoes by first gathering up the manure (a mixture of “dung and filth of every kind”) they have collected in front of their cabins:

the man is seen up to his ankles, and sometimes nearly to his knees in sludge, scraping up matter, both animal and vegetable, in a state of semi-decomposition, partly in a fluid state, which is called *gullion*. This he fills, heedless of effluvia, into a square wicker basket, called a *kreel* (the interstices being clogged to prevent the contents from running out), which he carried on his back to the “garden,” where his wife is employed in spreading this stuff on the ground with her hands, while some of the children, of whom there is seldom any scarcity, are employed in depositing the seed potatoes on the beds.<sup>55</sup>

Thus immersed in fluids and mixtures, working in an indistinct zone where earth and water, waste and nourishment, animal and human intermingle, the image of the cottiers underscores the standard English

perception of rural Irish life as a space of crossings and confusion, which generates a way of being that compels but repels understanding.

The Irish cabin is the classic instance, its typically low contours blurring the distinction between earth and habitation, and its rapid proliferation in the late eighteenth-century countryside representing what a recent historian calls a “seeping through the cracks of an otherwise well ordered geographical pattern.”<sup>56</sup> By the turn of the nineteenth century, the cabin was already a venerable cliché in travel-texts; nevertheless, it continued to be foregrounded in the Irish tour. This repeated return to the trope, Hadfield and McVeagh argue, had a great deal to do with the way in which the cabin represented a challenge to English notions of domestic space, particularly to English assumptions about “the permanence, comfort and strength required of a family house.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, for most British writers the cabin was inconceivable *as* domestic space. “In hovels, too wretched to deserve the name of houses, or even of pig-styes,” wrote James Mill in the *Edinburgh Review*, “mixed at bed and board with the animals whom they rear, more than half naked, with nothing but potatoes to eat . . . they lead the life of beasts rather than of men.”<sup>58</sup> Since Mill himself had never visited Ireland, his cabin is an entirely textual construct drawn from the standard repertoire of cultural tropes. But while Mills’ cabin is standard, his blunt contempt is unusual in the period, when most travelers tended not so much to dismiss the cabin with disgust as to transform it into a sentimental sign of economic wretchedness and political neglect. Curwen is exemplary, visiting cabins along the way to ascertain the extent of misery, and describing several “heart-rending” scenes. But he soon stops such visits: “I had not courage to explore further, and became impatient to escape from the repetition of scenes too wretched for human nature to endure, and too multiplied to be within my power to relieve.”<sup>59</sup> Overwhelmed by such multiplication, he retreats from that which his liberal reason cannot alleviate even as his text continues to search for rational solutions suggested by its paradigms.

In such moments, Curwen constructs himself as a man of sentiment, but he also underlines a split between affect and reason that points to a bafflement of the English mind in Irish home space. The characteristic note of the Irish tour when faced with the Irish cabin is puzzlement. The cabin confounds because it suggests that the Irish live in their bodies and in their families in a very different way.<sup>60</sup> Surrounded by a dung-hill on the outside and mixing sexes and species within, it was generally read as a site of primitive undifferentiation and excess, but at the same time it proved a place of surprising reserve and decorum. The tone is struck

by an influential late eighteenth-century tour, Thomas Campbell's *A Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland* (1777). Campbell, an Anglo-Irish clergyman living in Ireland but assuming the role of Englishman in his text, offers a lengthy description of the stock Irish cabin on which later travelers were repeatedly to draw. In particular, he presents the cabin as a scene of mingling: "upon the same floor, and frequently without any partition, are lodged the husband and wife, the multitudinous brood of children, all huddled together upon straw or rushes, with the cow, the calf, the pig, and the horse, if they are rich enough to have one."<sup>61</sup> What surprises Campbell is that although one would expect incest to be common in such "promiscuous" scenes, he finds no evidence of it. Later travelers reiterate the point, often explicitly citing Campbell, as does Carr when he notes that the crowding together of different sexes in one room does not produce "sensual depravity." Nor, he notes, is the promise of the exterior (with its heaped-up "filth") fulfilled by the interior, where "every degree of decency prevails."<sup>62</sup>

A certain pastoralism is often at work in such commentary, but the perplexity is nonetheless genuine and profound. Travel writers were especially puzzled by how the cabins produced strong bodies and healthy children in defiance of modern reason and prediction. Arthur Young had stressed the point himself in his pioneering *Tour in Ireland*, where he cited the health of the Irish as evidence for the nourishing qualities of the despised potato.<sup>63</sup> But in early nineteenth-century tours such rational explanation tended to drop out and only the unexpected outcome of health remained. Native Irish children, commented Thomas Erlington, former Provost of Trinity College, in 1808, "are generally half, and sometimes altogether naked, living without distinction of sexes in dirt and mire, almost with the cattle. Yet from this nakedness and filth, they grow up to that strength and stature for which they are admirable."<sup>64</sup> Travel writer after travel writer made similar comments, astonished at the way in which an apparently insalubrious environment produced robust and modest beings. Such insistence may work doubly: to domesticate Irish difference on the one hand (the wild are decent after all) and to make it substantial on the other (they really are a different race of beings). By the mid-nineteenth century both readings of the Irish body were to be firmly in place, but in the early years of the century, matters were more fluid, the Irish question itself in uncertain transition. In such an intervalic moment, the persistent return to the cabin attests to a troubled sense of an alterity that cannot quite be turned to account. The Irish cabin keeps obtruding in English discourse, and the note of bafflement lingers: How

can Ireland be so fertile and so poor? The people so wretched and so healthy? This cabin a home?

As the post-Union Irish tour keeps coming back again and again to these questions, articulating them through the same tropes and reaching the same bafflement, not only does Ireland emerge as a limit-point of English intelligibility but the travel-text itself begins to take on something of the repetitive, non-progressive temporality in which it routinely confined the native Irish. An odd merging or duplication occurs. The Irish tour – liberal, rational, responsible, and masculine in its official self-understanding – turns out to display at the same time a textual promiscuity and fecklessness that align it with the grotesque female body of the illiberal Ireland it so distrusts. What helps account for this convergence, the last section of the chapter will argue, is that the civic ambition of the tour was unhinged not just by encounter with a baffling referent but by an ambiguity internal to the genre of travel writing itself.

#### EQUIVOCAL FORM

In the early nineteenth century, travels could be said to constitute less a genre than a generic possibility: a loose discursive field, notoriously diverse and disordered, out of which the new and powerful critical discourse linked to quarterlies like the *Edinburgh Review* sought to carve a normative form, a specific genre. The problem was not simply that travel writing manifested itself in assorted modes – picturesque, sentimental, scientific, philosophic, agricultural, antiquarian, and so forth – but that any volume of travels, no matter its primary mode, generally took the form of what John Gough's *A Tour in Ireland* cheerfully calls a "heterogeneous medley" (239). As a hybrid and uneven writing operating well outside the stabilizing author-function famously defined by Foucault, it was understood as a frontier discourse, a quasi-genre on the edge of the settled literary field. It occupied an ambiguous position, straddling the genres of entertainment on the one hand (e.g., the lounging book) and those of utility on the other (e.g., the statistical treatise); travel books were at once objects of display and repositories of knowledge, serving their middle-class readers as signs of both social status and intellectual capital. And even more unsettling than their generic indeterminacy was their notorious "intertextual plenitude" (to use Frances Bartkowski's phrase<sup>65</sup>), which confounded the distinction between one text and another, between what is properly one's own and what belongs to someone else. Undermining the literary category of authorship through this casual sense of text as