Porous Borders: Maria Edgeworth and the Question of National Identity

The question of borders was not only crucial to how Britons understood Britain’s relationship with other nations; it was also a fundamental one when it came to their understanding of Britain itself. In particular, the question arose in the early years of the century in relation to Ireland, now a member of the British polity as a consequence of the 1801 Act of Union. Ireland’s incorporation put pressure on the dominant Burkean conception of nation, and in response, writers on both sides of the Irish Sea turned to alternative models that better represented the new political situation. Pro-union and pro-Catholic emancipation, the Edinburgh Review generally drew on Smith’s political economy to figure Irish–English political relations in terms of international trade, and this model underlies Maria and Robert Lovell Edgeworth’s commentary on Ireland in the journal. Their co-written review ‘Carr’s Stranger in Ireland’ (April 1807) formulates union as the free circulation of citizens and goods between Ireland and England: ‘it is a farce to talk of an incorporating union having taken place between two countries’, they insist, ‘whilst the inhabitants cannot pass or repass from either country, without undergoing a search as rigorous as if they were in an enemy’s territory: whilst the duties and drawbacks of excise operate as checks upon the transfer of property, and even upon locomotion’. Such a formulation of union recalls Kant’s ‘union of states’ in that it allows for the free movement across borders but not the elimination of them, and entails a particular understanding of nationness.

In ‘Virtue, travel and the Enlightenment’ (1995), Séamus Deane points out that at the turn of the nineteenth century Enlightenment forms of narrative like the philosophical tale were threatened by a ‘newly assertive nationalism, predicated on notions of national character’. The kind of national narrative he has in mind is represented by a figure like...
Edmund Burke, but the same Anglo-Irish milieu that produced Burke also produced Maria Edgeworth, who offered a rather different reading of national identity in the same period. Her writings on Ireland, especially her early Irish tales, offer an important rearticulation of Burkean local attachment and philosophical cosmopolitanism to produce an understanding of the nation as neither tightly bordered (like nations based on historical premises such as blood or inheritance) nor borderless (like those based on rational notions of universal inclusion). Edgeworth’s own Anglo-Irish allegiance is central to this project, but her effort to rethink nationness makes her more than the colonial writer who tends to figure in much current criticism.  

In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke attempted to increase the political distance between England and revolutionary France by presenting the English nation as a historical continuity. The nation becomes the organic culmination of history: hereditary rank and inherited property preserve the constitutional freedoms enjoyed by the English people, a ‘patrimony derived from their forefathers’. Burke couples this notion of historical continuity with affinity to place, the rudimentary ‘germ’ of public affection (97). As we saw in Chapter 1, national identity begins with local attachment and extends outward, encompassing neighbourhood, province, and ultimately nation. In order to reinforce the point, Burke draws on the vocabulary of familial relations: ‘In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars’ (84). Kinship – ‘relation in blood’ – ensures the historical continuity that defines the English nation. It is also the departure point for the series of social relations that compose national affection: ‘We begin our public affections in our families’ (244). By troping national identity as an inheritance, specifically ‘an inheritance from our forefathers’, Burke activates the standard conflation of political and domestic in the period to create a self-enclosed England (81). If nationness is historical continuity perpetrated though local attachment, then French nationality has been upset first by the cosmopolitan philosophy