INTRODUCTION

Fiorenzo Fantaccini and Raffaella Leproni

After 250 years, Maria Edgeworth still proves to be a formidable author(ess); she was a pivotal figure at her time, and her works, branching into many different disciplines – some of which have probably developed starting from her very contribution – inspired her contemporaries and still appeal to scholars dealing with a great variety of human sciences, so much so that her work "resists easy categorization" (Nash 2006, xv). As Aileen Douglas cleverly points out, though, "as an educationalist, writer of children's stories and novelist, Edgeworth had a conspicuously long and successful career; today, her works appear on the curricula of courses in Irish Studies, Women's Studies, Children's Literature and Romanticism. Yet, while Edgeworth's range of endeavour is noted, its significance remains underappreciated" (2007, 581). This lack of acknowledgement of Edgeworth's role in the foundation and development of modern thinking has only partially been re-addressed; in recent years, numerous studies have underlined Edgeworth's significance in both her contemporary and our contemporary literary, cultural, scientific and educational panorama. The majority of her works, however, are not generally considered as a well-established part of the canon – except for her "regional novels" -, apparently being labelled as minor productions.

This collection of international contributions, as well as celebrating Maria Edgeworth's 250th anniversary, proposes some further investigation on two fundamental aspects of her thought and legacy, still little examined in depth: her interest in the education of the young (and of the adults supposed to educate them) in an empirical perspective, explicitly scientific, open to different religious confessions and addressed to all social classes; and the urge for a wider and shared tolerance for alterity. The various essays in the collection offer some insight on the multi-layered relationships between the universe of education and its relationship with the development of knowledge, literature – particularly children's literature – and pedagogy, as well as between women's emancipation and the development of both individual and social identity. Their common ground is a dialogic perspective aiming to connect areas of scholarship, which the academia generally classifies into separate research fields.

Raffaella Leproni, Fiorenzo Fantaccini (eds), *"Still Blundering into Sense". Maria Edgeworth, her context, her legacy*,

ISSN 2420-8361 (online), ISBN 978-88-6453-971-3 (online PDF)

The *"Portrait of a Lady"* drawn by Carla de Petris introduces Maria Edgeworth to the reader providing a thorough account of her as a real person: not only the writer, the authoress, the educator, but also the woman of her times, and beyond. The place she lived in, what people thought of her, what she thought of the real people of her everyday life. de Petris visited Edgeworthstown and collected photographs, paintings and drawings that she uses "to present a portrait of Maria Edgeworth, the historical, geographical and social context within which she lived and the cultural impact of her long life" (*infra*, 1), highlighting the "foregrounding aspects and traits of Maria Edgeworth's character, of the places where she lived and ended her long life, along with a description of the socio-cultural and historical context in which she developed her intellectual commitment as a writer and pedagogue" (*infra*, 1).

The first section of the book, "**Maria Edgeworth in Context**", collects three essays offering some inspiring perspectives on the role of thought and literature in the mechanisms of power balancing the multi-faceted context Edgeworth contributed to build. At the dawn of the XIX century, history was at a turning point for Ireland: the years that led to the Act of Union (which came into effect on January 1, 1801), as well as those which followed it, were ebullient of animated debate on the many questions concerning the changes that such a resolution would and could bring. Changes (some saw even some opportunity) that would not affect only the higher spheres of the central power, but above all the everyday life of citizens, who were now called to develop a sense of belonging and participation into a new vision of their country, which was still unclear. In this context, Edgeworth – English by birth and fortune - wrote in defence of Irish identity, formulating her vision in terms of respect rather than tolerance, thus pushing herself a little ahead of the Enlightened ideas brought by the French and the American Revolution only a few years before.

Ian Campbell Ross's essay is concerned with the many social, political and national implications of the untranslatable idea of "improvement", a word which significantly shifts "colour and meaning" through time. His essay skilfully underlines how the concept of a "gradual and cumulative betterment" informs Edgeworth's whole production, and remarks how the "patriotic, socially aware, and outwardly altruistic desire by both Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell, to 'improve' Ireland can only be fully understood in the context of a centuries-long attempt by England to Anglicize, as well as rule, the neighbouring island" (*infra*, 29).

The relationship of Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education* (1798) to her political philosophy in the 1790s and beyond is explored in Susan Manly's contribution. Maria's reading of the most influential thinkers of her time all around Europe, and in particular of Beccaria, gave literary

and philosophical shape to her "personal experiences of and reflections on political and social conflict in late eighteenth-century Ireland: a conflict that she and her father saw as the consequence of unrepresentative government, unjust laws, and the misrepresentation of the people" – the very people Edgeworth "saw, heard, talked to", and of which circumstances she "obtained full knowledge" (*infra*, 48).

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's essay delves into the distribution of space and its role in the circulation of secrets in some of Edgeworth's narrative. In the long eighteenth century, the need for a distinction between public and private and the consequent emergence of domesticity become a crucial instance of the modern division of knowledge. Edgeworth's secrets are part of the life of narrative, and do not aim at long-standing puzzlement in the reader: they "do not create suspense but reveal character", being "connected with the layout of a household, orderly or otherwise, and with the exploitation of spaces as they reflect the distribution of resources". The relation of masters and servants, "the anxieties created (on both sides) by closeness to, or distance from, the centre of power", the "concern for a proper degree of privacy with the orderly, 'English' … manner of inhabiting a dwelling" (*infra*, 75) bring the reader along the corridors of Maria's narrative mansion, as well as along the paths of the building of a new, self-aware subjectivity.

The second section, **"Women, contemporaries, legacy"**, aims at exploring the impact of Edgeworth's personality and works on other women engaged in cultural production, considering the social acceptance they encountered, and tracing similarities and differences in the development of their view, especially concerning the new status of women following the Enlightenment debate.

Liliosa Azara traces a brief outline of the history of the female condition in the western world during the eighteenth century, noting the role and type of culture which fostered the separation between the public and private spheres of life. Azara's research postulates that "the silence of women within the latter ambit should act as a guarantee of the solidity of the patriarchal structures upon which society was founded" (*infra*, 81), and historical events failed to provide a space where women might be the protagonists of collective action, in a new dimension favouring the construction of female identity. The cornerstone of the female form of "dissidence" some exceptional women like Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges and George Sand were able to carry forward, was, emblematically, the public use of their intellect.

Elena Cotta Ramusino explores some consequences of the diffusion of Edgeworth's regional novels. Analysing Bowen's "dialogue with the concerns posed by the genre" of the Big House Novel, focussing on her autobiographical production and on the part Edgeworth's influence played

on it, Cotta Ramusino highlights how Bowen reveals her social anxieties resulting in an "impending sense of disappearance of her class" (*infra*, 110), and in the exploration of her own "hyphenated" Anglo-Irish identity.

Maria Anita Stefanelli skilfully tracks down the influence of Edgeworth on Margaret Fuller, who mentioned Maria in her *Memoirs*, her letters, and her proto-feminist essay, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" "making various references to Edgeworth's usefulness and practicality", sketching remarkable similarities and divergences in their opinions. Though living on the two opposite sides of the Ocean and belonging to a different generation, "they undoubtedly shared a love of learning and a rejection of prejudice. They had their own intellectual pursuits, and played a role in the social, educational, and cultural life of their own nations as well as those abroad" (*infra*, 127), in pursuing a freer society.

In her contribution Milena Gammaitoni revives a widely discussed topic such as "the lack of an egalitarian education between men and women" between the XVIII and XIX centuries (and beyond), offering some hints on how Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth "clarified and criticized, in different tones and modalities, the social dynamics of which they were witnesses" (*infra*, 141). In particular, Gammaitoni chooses *Belinda* – that Mitzi Myers claimed to be the "best and most misread" novel of the 1790s – as a most interesting literary output to investigate the controversial relationship which linked the two authors[1].

Fabio Luppi deals with the multifaceted implications of the word "absence" in relation to Maria Edgeworth's dramas. Contemporary and later criticism seems to have paid very little attention to Edgeworth's theatrical attempts, if not neglected them completely "within the misrecognition of her much more important literary production in the last centuries". Even such writers as "the champions of the Celtic revival and of the Irish theatre", W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, who might have had an interest in recovering Edgeworth's example, did not consider her works. According to Luppi, "the lack of attention on Edgeworth's dramatic works with the misrecognition of her position in the Irish literary world sadly mirrors the fate of other Irish women playwrights of the twentieth century, such as 'the two ladies' of the Abbey Theatre, Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy" (*infra*, 158).

In her essay Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez analyses the striking coincidences between Edgeworth's heroine in *Manoeuvring* and *Lady Susan*, but also examines how the Anglo-Irish author went further and originally adapted her first *manoeuvrer* to a new context in one of her

[1] See Myers (2000) where she challenges some earlier feminist assumptions about the novel, also questioning the perspective by which Belinda is "coercively domestic" (104), or that Harriot Freke can be read as queer.

most famous Irish tales published in 1812, just around the time Austen revised *Lady Susan*, which comes to be a reworking of Edgeworth's stories. Fernández Rodríguez also examines the narrative technique employed by Edgeworth and the development of the Edgeworthian type that Austen would make popular with *Lady Susan* herself.

The final section deals with **"Education and heritage"**. Maria, like her father, firmly believed in the value and the role of education in the growth of citizens and nations. In over forty years of career, she developed a remarkable breadth of genders, topics and contents, which, facing the need for education at all stages, link the social and cultural context she lived in with questions of religious, national, social and gender identity in terms of citizenship and respect. Her wide-range analysis of the human being, conveyed into texts of various genres and scope that reached a vast and diversified reading public[2], meant to contribute to the formation of a critical spirit, both individual and collective, fostering the knowledge of one's own role in the world. The idea is not only modern, but it also represents one of the most urgent issues of our contemporary educational goals.

Aileen Douglas identifies Maria Edgeworth's ability to create "credible child protagonists with distinctive voices", whom the reader can follow in their process of growing though different stories, as her most distinctive contribution to the development of children's literature. Her collections of short stories for children shape "a world of conversation in which adults listen to children, and juvenile readers hear their peers speak" (*infra*, 205) – a best practice to suggest to all parents and educators. The references Edgeworth makes to books she deemed "useful, or entertaining books for children" (*infra*, 281) by other writers, also, while offering food for thought to her contemporaries, provide us with a deep and well-reasoned insight into the range of children's literature at the time.

In her essay Violeta Popova compares the project on shaping education means and purposes according to the different gender of children that Edgeworth proposes in her stories, with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). Maria and her father's belief in the value of "the cultivation of understanding" and on the role of scientific subjects in positively influencing women's domestic life, enabling women to be "both agreeable and happy" (*infra*, 228), is at the basis of many exemplary characters Edgeworth sketched (especially in *Early Lessons*) on the subject. Her stories and views caught on with many imitators, across different social classes; so much so that they even influenced a young Queen Victoria.

[2] According to W. J. McCormack (2004), she was "the most commercially successful novelist of her age"; see also Meaney, O'Dowd Whelan (2013, 71).

Amelia Mori's contribution demonstrates how Maria Edgeworth's stories are still alive and up-to-date in many respects, as they have been serving as experimental authentic materials in teaching English as a second language in Italian Primary Schools for the last ten years. Different projects have been carried out in Primary and Pre-School classes using "The Purple Jar" and "The Little Merchants", among others, to introduce English through storytelling and CLIL activities. Their great educational value, as well as their moral intent, "are still relevant to our pupils" (*infra*, 239), while the style and structure of the tales allow teachers to foster a communicative approach and peer-coaching in the classroom, providing useful resources that every teacher can rely on.

Raffaella Leproni's analysis concerns Edgeworth's conception of education as a science, a "strategy for processing information through experience". Leproni provides a variety of evidence of how Maria's writings centre on "identity, citizenship, and morality; ideas that she (and her father) deem necessary to achieve some degree of happiness in both private and social life" (*infra*, 280). Texts designed for children are at the core of the Edgeworths' educational project, as they believe that "children derive their first impressions of the world from the narrations they receive, mostly from the books they read or have read to them, as well as [...] from the example they receive from adults, whether through direct comparison or reading" (*infra*, 264). Their attentive social analysis also allowed them to understand the urge for "enhancing the precarious situation of schooling in Ireland" scaffolding "the development of a new method of teacher training" (*infra*, 253). In her texts, in fact, Maria often questions the role of institutions and authority on the subject, maintaining the pivotal importance of a life-long perspective in making knowledge a useful experience for the development of individuals into active, happy citizens.

In the Appendix, the Edgeworth Society (Edgeworthstown) kindly offered their contribution with a historical overview on *Edgeworthstown: The Landscape from Where Maria Edgeworth drew her Inspiration*, describing the vicissitudes of the territory that hosted Maria and her family, as well as the many people who played a part in preserving Edgeworth's heritage and legacy.

In the collective feeling, memory is not static but cyclic. The research for recovering identity goes through the re-discovering of the rites and actions of social tradition. We hope that this collection will not only bring back a memory of Edgeworth's work and achievements, but also and above all function as a flywheel to inspire new scholars, students, and (curious) readers on experimenting new strategies on the good old paths. After all, education – as Maria stated repeatedly – *is* a science, so once we develop an interest in it, we must bear its consequences with good humour.

Works Cited

Douglas Aileen (2007), Review of Julie Nash (ed.), *New Essays on Maria Edgeworth*, Aldershot, Ashgate, *The Review of English Studies*, LVIII, 236, 581-583.

McCormack W.J. (2004), "Edgeworth, Maria (1768-1849)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8476> (10/2019).

Meaney Gerardine, O'Dowd Mary, Whelan Bernadette (2013), "Educating Women, Patriotism and Public Life, 1770–1845", in Idd., *Reading the Irish Woman. Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714–1960*, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 54-84.

Myers Mitzi (2000), "My Art Belongs to Daddy? Thomas Day, Maria Edgeworth, and the Pre-Texts of *Belinda*: Women Writers and Patriarchal Authority", in P. R. Backscheider (ed.), *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century 'Women's Fiction' and Social Engagement*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 104-146.

Nash Julie, ed. (2006), *New Essays on Maria Edgeworth*, Aldershot, Ashgate.