CHAPTER 7

The Art of Teaching to Invent
Maria Edgeworth and the Lunar Society

At the end of the line of eighteenth-century mock artists stands Maria Edgeworth, the Anglo-Irish novelist and educational theorist. Her publishing career began in 1795 with a peculiar miscellany of half-didactic pieces, *Letters for Literary Ladies*. 'Added' to this miscellany – although considered by Edgeworth's bookseller Joseph Johnson to be the main piece – is an 'Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification'.[1] The 'Essay' is a mock art about overbearing female manners, and it follows a satirical pattern familiar from Jane Collier's *Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* (1753). The joke is that 'self-justification' is presented not as a thoughtless egotistical reflex but as a technical process.

It is obvious that the 'Essay on Self-Justification' remained significant to Edgeworth through the first few decades of her long authorial career. She alludes to it six years later in *Belinda* (1801), the first of her 'Moral Tales' set in English polite society and her most widely read novel.[2] Its most imposing character, a brilliant and artificial woman of fashion named Lady Delacour, tells Belinda Portman, her young charge, the story of her unhappy marriage. The older woman describes gaslighting her husband. She was, she admits, 'a tolerable proficient in the dear art of *self-justification*'.[3] This glancing self-reference suggests the thirty-three-year-old Edgeworth's confidence in the body of published work she had completed already and marks a continuing interest in her own early mock art. In the early 1820s, however, during one of several rounds of authorial revision to the novel's text, the sentence undergoes a significant alteration. From *Belinda*'s 1825 edition onwards Lady Delacour becomes 'a tolerable proficient in the dear art of *tormenting*'.[4] Edgeworth swaps out the title of her own mock art for a direct reference to Collier's earlier mock treatise. It is a fleeting but generous gesture. The work of a little-known female satirist is acknowledged (Collier had been identified publicly as author of *The Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* in its third edition of 1804), and the outline of a longer tradition of didactic burlesque is glimpsed.

The mock-artistic inheritance forms a pattern with Edgeworth's narrative method in *Belinda*. Belinda Portman is a heroine much encumbered with instruction. Advice comes to her in long letters from her matchmaking aunt Stanhope (specialist in 'that branch of knowledge, which is called the art of rising in the world'), in blunt challenges from the buffoonish radical Harriet Freke and in Lady Delacour's alarming and admonitory confessions of her own dissipation. The heroine of Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) had longed for 'a book, of the laws and customs *à-la-mode*, presented to all young people, upon their first introduction into public company'.[5] Even while still a 'novice of novices' Belinda meets that sort of direct instruction with a contrastingly independent mind. She is patient of 'the tedious minuteness of didactic illustration', as Edgeworth called it in *Practical Education* (1798), the treatise in experimental pedagogics she wrote with her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth.[6] The advice of experienced women makes up, in the form of anecdotes and reminiscences, much of the novel's textual bulk. But Belinda sees at once that personal experiences are valuable only as material for larger comparisons of principles and characters.

Edgeworth acknowledged the complaints of readers about her 'triste utilité', as Madame de Staël called it, and about her didacticism: how she lectures without making it clear what she wants to teach; how she lets the lecturing compromise her social realism.[7] As a criticism of style this hits home, but it does mistake *Belinda*'s satirical elements and its moral method. Like the mock artists who came before her, Edgeworth's attitude to the instructions offered by her characters in *Belinda* is always sceptical and often ironic. 'Before any person is properly qualified *to teach*', she wrote, 'he must have the power of recollecting exactly how *he learned*; he must go back step by step to the point at which he began, and he must be able to conduct his pupil through the same path.'[8] At issue in *Belinda* is no specific personal art or social code. Edgeworth's concern as an educationalist is with the art of instruction itself and with its relation to knowledge gained through more personal processes of self-instruction.

The satirical component in Edgeworth's writing connects at several points, as we will see in this chapter, with mock didactic writing. Her satire also marks a complication in her relationship with the Lunar Society of Birmingham, the celebrated scientific club whose members' work is represented often as the primary intellectual (and consequently didactic) context for *Belinda*.[9] In histories of the Industrial Enlightenment the Lunar group features as an exemplary knowledge network. It was a social grouping in which experimental philosophy crossed over with mechanical

invention, and productive systematisation joined forces with scientific curiosity.[10] The attendance of Maria's father Richard Lovell at Lunar Society meetings, where he pursued his life-long interest in practical mechanics, provided material for crucial episodes in his memoirs. Among its members the Edgeworths remained friends and correspondents with the poet and physician Erasmus Darwin and the chemist James Keir. Richard Lovell's close friendship with the educationalist Thomas Day predated their mutual Lunar connection. The episodes in *Belinda* that describe Clarence Hervey's ill-judged attempt to educate a young orphan, Virginia St Pierre, to be an ideal wife, contain the novel's most recognisably Lunar material. They are based on Keir's exculpatory account of Day's attempts between 1769 and 1771 to train up two girls for the same purpose.[11] Lofty in principle and abusive in application, Day's marital experiment, as Keir recounted it, is softened again in Edgeworth's retelling, which she pitches somewhere between tragicomedy (a much-discussed mode in *Belinda*) and social satire.[12] Edgeworth presents experimental thinking and intelligent, objective observation of ordinary social phenomena as virtues to be cultivated through everyday habits, in the Lunar style.[13] Clarence Hervey's boast to the learned Dr X that he can take Lady Delacour's pulse without her knowing it (she is in Elizabethan fancy dress, and he counts the delicate tremors in her ruff) is a typical example. Such 'ingenious use of a trifling observation', as Dr X calls it, is of just the sort that Darwin squirrelled away in the curious philosophical notes to his scientific poems.[14] The inclusion in *Belinda* of experimental set pieces, such as those where the children of the idealised Percival family investigate whether their goldfish have hearing, correspond with recommendations in *Practical Education* that young people should recreate similar experiments, with models to be found in essays by the Lunar affiliates Joseph Priestley and Benjamin Franklin.[15] *Belinda* is a spirited recasting of practical Lunar principles in a novel of polite social observation.

These Lunar Society contexts for Edgeworth's novel are significant. This chapter attempts, however, to separate them from what she made new in her writing, taking them as the intellectual furniture that she inherited from her father and his friends but distinguishing them from her own artistic thinking. The significant question is what Edgeworth needed as an innovating novelist that the Lunar group could not supply. It is necessary to pull the contextual focus back a little to find the answer. The Lunar Society and its members sat among a constellation of scientific associations and actors that lit up Britain's Industrial Enlightenment.[16] It is assumed that literature was particularly important to the Lunar Society, mainly on

the strength of Darwin's scientific poems and of children's literature published by other members of the group. In his memoirs Richard Lovell Edgeworth described the group primarily as an association of writers 'devoted to literature and science'.[17] But they were not interested enough in polite literature to discuss critical issues alongside scientific ones (which did happen at the Manchester Lit and Phil, for example). Maria would have been especially hard pressed to find models for satire in their works.[18]

Useable literary and satirical models were available to Edgeworth, however, just outside the Lunar frame, particularly among the wider circle of authors published by Johnson, the bookseller whom Darwin, Priestley and Edgeworth all shared. Lunar philosophers set about professionalising (by rendering mechanical and scientific) processes that previously had been matters of artisanal skill or amateur practice. That is what Keir, John Boulton and Josiah Wedgwood did in their manufactories, and what Robert Boyle had claimed to be doing a century before. Wedgwood dreamed of making 'such *machines* of the *Men* as cannot err'.[19] Edgeworth's thinking had a different and sometimes opposing tendency. In *Belinda* she reasserts the personal sources of human wit, ingenuity and invention, which she understood to be connected (through what we would now recognise as the psychology of extended cognition) with haptic skills and accomplishments. Her interest in this connection was informed by two late Enlightenment philosophers, Darwin and Dugald Stewart, whom she knew personally and whose works she read and discussed. But in the literary and satirical expression she gave to these ideas her work is rooted too in the tradition of early modern and British Enlightenment mock technical satire. In the preface to *Harry and Lucy Concluded* (1825) Edgeworth attributed to her father the life-long project of bringing 'into popular form' what a long line of natural philosophers, which she traces from Robert Hooke to Stewart, wrote about 'the nature and conduct of the understanding':

> The art of teaching to invent—I dare not say—but of awakening and assisting the inventive power by daily exercise and excitement, and by the application of philosophic principles to trivial occurrences, he believed might be pursued with infinite advantage to the rising generation.[20]

This programme of popularisation may have been Richard Lovell's ambition, but it was Maria Edgeworth's task. Where her father dreamed of 'teaching to invent', Maria hesitates to characterise what is clearly her own programme of literary 'exercise and excitement' as an 'art'. This chapter will look at some of the more oblique and mock-technical strategies that she adopted instead.

Belinda, Female Wit and Usefulness

With her first publication for the bookseller Joseph Johnson, the *Letters for Literary Ladies* miscellany of 1795, Maria Edgeworth cleared herself ground as an author. In her role as an educationalist she was able to acknowledge several women writers as models.[21] But as a satirist and female wit, the path forward was ambiguous and rarely trodden. In the opening 'Letter' Edgeworth writes in the voice of a conservative gentleman – half Stoic advocate of virtue in the style of Day, half Burkean proponent of 'chivalry' – on the social structures that confine female learning. This character's comments reflect concerns she must also have felt, despite the sceptical framing:

> Not only time but opportunity must be wanting to complete female studies – we [men] mix with the world without restraint, we converse freely with all classes of people, with men of wit, of science, of learning, with the artist, the mechanic, the labourer; every scene of life is open to our view;– every assistance that foreign or domestic ingenuity can invent, to encourage literary studies, is ours almost exclusively. From academies, colleges, public libraries, private associations of literary men, women are excluded [. . .] women must always see things through a veil, or cease to be women.[22]

Edgeworth encourages her readers not to take this man at his word. But she also expects his point, that learned culture has an associational basis, to seem basically convincing. Particularly distinctive is his assertion that intellectual 'conversation' is by necessity socially plural – mixing poets with mechanics, and scientists with labourers – but that the condition of this social plurality is the exclusion of women. This is quite a specific and modernistic idea of what the life of the mind should be, a Baconian vision more likely to be recognised by Enlightenment philosophers and Lunar scientists than by polite society more broadly. In the 'Answer' that follows this 'Letter' a second gentleman disagrees with the first, insisting that female intellectual progress is in fact inevitable and has a technological basis. 'The art of printing has totally changed their [women's] situation', he comments; 'their eyes are opened.' Rather than being plural by nature, the experience of contemporary men of letters is that modernity obliges them to contract their inquiries. Professional specialism and the requirements of a busy, active life degrade them to the status of 'literary artisans [. . .] who cultivate only particular talents or powers of the mind'. Only literary women have 'no such constraint upon their understandings [. . .] in domestic life they have leisure to be wise'.[23] In both her argument and her figural language Edgeworth uses the sorts of analogies between literary and

'useful' or mechanical–artisanal work that are characteristic, as we have seen, of the Enlightenment mock arts. She understands these analogies to be gendered and indicates that she is seeking her own path through them. What distinguishes female wit is its basis in slower and more spacious opportunities for reflection. It belongs to the realm of genteel leisure, rather than to that of punctual action.

The role of the female wit offers one way around the problem of the narrow 'literary artisan', as even the first gentleman can see. Here again, however, Edgeworth's position is poised carefully between the attractions of genius, facility and wit, and the claims of discretion and propriety. As the first gentleman remarks:

> The pleasure of being admired for wit or erudition, I cannot exactly measure in a female mind, but state it to be as great as you reasonably can suppose it, there are evils attendant upon it, which, in the estimation of a prudent father, may over-balance the good. The intoxicating effect of wit upon the brain, has been well remarked by a poet, who was a friend to the fair sex, and too many ridiculous, and too many disgusting, examples confirm the truth of the observation.[24]

Once again, Edgeworth signals that we should be sceptical about this statement. The poet is George Lyttelton, who wrote of wit being an intoxicant 'too strong for feeble Woman to sustain' in *Advice to a Lady* – addressed, significantly, to a 'Belinda'.[25] Lyttelton's admonitions were objects of mock-artistic satire by a female wit with a very strong head, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: 'Be plain in Dress and sober in your Diet', went her parody: 'In short my Dearee, kiss me, and be quiet.'[26] Day, who had not read Montagu perhaps, used to recite Lyttelton's line at Richard Lovell when arguing that Maria should not be allowed to publish her own writing.[27] Lyttelton had himself borrowed the thought, in any case, from an earlier and supremely unfashionable poet, Sir Richard Blackmore, who writes in *A Satyr Against Wit* about 'Youths' who overdose on cleverness ('Th' intoxicating Draught they cannot bear').[28] By referring to Lyttelton and Blackmore the first gentleman aligns himself alternately with an ambivalent 'friend to the fair sex' and with a notorious dunce and bad writer. Edgeworth herself satirises Blackmore's 'laughable confusion of ideas' in *An Essay on Irish Bulls* and refers to him contemptuously in *Professional Education* as 'the medical, metaphysical, and poetical knight'.[29] None of this is to say, however, that she disagrees with Lyttelton's point. In *Practical Education* she is similarly stern about the zero-sum choice parents must make between solid judgement and brilliancy of humour when bringing up young people of either sex.[30] At the same time, however, she finds

something monstrous about a woman completely in control of her wit. In the mock-technical 'Essay on Self-Justification', which closes Edgeworth's *Letters* miscellany, the vicious lady narrator advocates an aggressively satirical discourse that transcends wit itself. If your husband is witty, she advises, then you must 'undervalue a talent which is never connected with judgment' and refuse to engage with him on those terms. If he is a philosopher, then a different kind of passive aggression is required. Let him construct a perfect chain of argument and when he arrives at 'the last link of the chain, with one electric shock of wit, make him quit his hold, and strike him to the ground in an instant'.[31] With this reference to electrical experiments Edgeworth returns us again to the Lunar milieu, through their particular association with her father's friends Franklin and Priestley. The concern of *Letters for Literary Ladies* is with reconciling the unstable, electrical energies of satirical wit to the legitimate (if not obligatory) constraints of propriety.

Edgeworth carries over these concerns to the novel *Belinda*. From its first chapter each of Edgeworth's major characters is caught up in the performance of intelligence, which most often manifests as satirical wit.[32] Despite the dangers attending it, wit always comes first for Edgeworth ahead of useful knowledge in any cognitive sequence. Having lost the beauty of youth Lady Delacour retains her position at the top of high society as a *bel esprit* through the sheer force of her wit.[33] Delacour acknowledges in turn that Belinda's aunt Stanhope is 'really a clever woman' in her campaigns on the social battlefield. Clarence Hervey, meanwhile, the admirer of both Lady Delacour and Belinda, is a resourceful and verbally versatile young man trying to live up to his premature reputation for 'genius', which is associated in *Belinda* particularly with mental rapidity. Belinda Portman is herself an accomplished and undesigning young woman, unfairly taken for 'a composition of art and affectation' bred up for the marriage market. She is suspected of cleverness by association with the witty company she keeps. In each case Edgeworth's residual Lunar interest in experiment and technical progress is secondary to the novel's principal dynamics of conversation, verbal invention and social performance. Reflecting on her painful encounters with Harriet Freke, the novel's other brilliant female exhibitionist, Belinda reflects on how those experiences have added a dimension of 'demonstration' to her previously abstract moral principles. As Edgeworth explains, slipping into her lofty didactic manner:

> Reasoning gradually became as agreeable to her [Belinda] as wit; nor was her taste for wit diminished, it was only refined by this process. She now compared and judged the value of the different species of this brilliant talent.[34]

Edgeworth's approach to the different characters of these performances is, like Belinda's, analytical and distinguishing. Evidence of her impulse to divide up the different species of female wit comes from a comparison of the published text of *Belinda* with its manuscript working plan.[35] In the original design there was no Harriet Freke, that lady's wildest extravagancies being allocated to Lady Delacour. It was only when writing the novel that Edgeworth split the character in two, to distinguish further the various psychologies of female intelligence.

If Edgeworth tended to divide and contrast her characterisations of female wit, she took the opposite approach on the male side. Clarence Hervey, the novel's ambiguous approximation of a hero and male wit, is, it must be allowed, a feminised figure, drifting passively through society and forever on display. He is more convincing when he cross-dresses (to show his accomplishments in managing a lady's complicated dress hoops) than either Lady Delacour or Harriet Freke is in their respective transvestite experiments.[36] In biographical terms Edgeworth created him out of a combination of witty men she knew or had heard of. He is based in part on her father, Richard Lovell, the celebrated amateur dancer and conjuror, who is the model for Hervey's energy and physical address; in part on Richard Lovell's rakish older friend Sir Francis Delavel, whose life provided the absurd episodes of the pig- and turkey-driving contest and the female duel; in part, as we have seen, on Thomas Day.[37] Indeed, Hervey is all things to all men, and the confusion of his roles – as a literary scholar, a wit, an experimentalist, an athlete, a person of fashion – has comic consequences. What makes him as much an object of Edgeworth's satire as a representative of the supremely valuable quality of wittiness is the discrepancy between his accomplishments and their lack of public application. As the philosopher Dr X remarks,

> What a pity, Mr. Hervey, that a young man of your talents and acquirements, a man who might be any thing, should—pardon the expression—choose to be—nothing; should waste upon petty objects powers suited to the greatest; should lend his soul to every contest for frivolous superiority, when the same energy concentrated might ensure honourable pre-eminence among the first men in his country. Shall he [. . .] who might be permanently useful to his fellow-creatures, content himself with being the evanescent amusement of a drawing-room?

In the original sketch for *Belinda* Edgeworth had planned a renunciation of idleness and a parliamentary career for Hervey.[38] The published text of the novel is more consistent and less straightforwardly didactic for denying him to its end any 'material utility' or profession. In part this confirms him as a sharer in the fates of the novel's brilliant female characters (and the fate

that the author may have expected for herself). His best hope is to be 'useful', like the saintly Percival family, on a domestic rather than a public or 'permanent' level.

Edgeworth's denial of a useful public career to Hervey confirms him as a satirical target. Hervey is most ridiculous when he tries to adapt Lunar-style practical knowledge to fashionable and witty ends. This is what happens in the episode where he attends a fancy-dress ball as a Miltonic serpent, 'such as he had seen in Fuseli's well known picture'.[39] Hervey exerts 'much ingenuity' in the construction of a mechanical costume, 'which he manœuvered with great dexterity, by means of internal wires'. The contrivance comes to nothing, however, when the phosphorous he has used for the serpent's glowing eyes sets fire to the skin of the costume. He had forgotten 'that phosphorous could not well be seen by candlelight'. Experiments with phosphorous were a staple of Lunar scientific demonstration, as they had been in the early years of the Royal Society.[40] As is often the case with Enlightenment mock artists, Edgeworth's comic treatment of this scientific heritage is entangled with a more positive engagement. Her satirical point is that Hervey's mechanical ingenuity and witty performance of cultural allusion seem all the more idle and self-destructive given their relation – a relation of translatability – with the experimental, 'useful' activities of Dr X and the Percivals.

Laborious Ease

What contemporary models were available to Edgeworth for her survey of characters of wit, and as she took on the role of satirist? We have seen she was aware of Collier's *Art of Ingeniously Tormenting*. Among the broader canon of Scriblerian mock arts, we know that John Gay's *Trivia* was popular in the Edgeworth household. In a letter of 1793 Maria reports to her aunt Ruxton that her father has been reading it out at the family fireside. 'I think there are many things in it which will please you', she comments, 'especially the "Patten and the Shoeblack".' It is unsurprising that this particular mock-georgic episode about mechanical invention was appreciated at Edgeworthstown.[41] Another piece of mock-heroic evidence comes in the closing pages of *Belinda*, which feature Lady Delacour wittily misquoting a well-known couplet from Pope's *Peri Bathous*.[42] In *Letters for Literary Ladies* Edgeworth suggested that associational life conferred a considerable advantage on the careers of literary men who belonged to the right club. One instance of scientific sociability with implications for satirical practice that she knew about is described by Richard Lovell in his

memoirs. Maria's father belonged to an exclusive philosophical society that met in the early 1780s at Slaughter's Coffee House in London. He recalled later how prospective members were put through a trial by satire:

> We practised every means in our power, except personal insult, to try the temper and understanding of each candidate for admission. Every prejudice, which his profession or situation in life might have led him to cherish, was attacked, exposed to argument and ridicule. The argument was always ingenious, and the ridicule sometimes coarse. This ordeal prevented for some time the aspiration of too numerous candidates.[43]

Once again, it is striking how entirely the function of conversational satire is given over – quite explicitly in this case – to the purpose of social exclusion and elite competition. As we will see, at the end of *Belinda* its heroine reflects that her encounters with the wit of Lady Delacour and the raillery of Harriet Freke were a series of salutary trials to her temper and understanding. They bear some comparison with those practiced at Slaughter's Coffee House. The tests at Richard Lovell's club focus a superior ingenuity on the prejudices of the candidate's profession. This is what mock-artistic satire does too.

The comedy of over-attachment to a project or expertise runs through nearly all of the Scriblerian mock arts and was something that Swift found particularly funny. There is evidence that the joke remained current in Edgeworth's milieu. In 1782 Joseph Johnson made a rare foray into the satire market when he published *The Philosophical Quixote*, a comic novel in epistolary form that owes much to Laurence Sterne, to Richard Graves and to Tobias Smollett's *Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771). Its main character is David Wilkins, a mid-Enlightenment re-casting of the Restoration virtuoso figure (with a surname, alluding presumably to John Wilkins, to match). Wilkins is an apothecary, as was John Elliot, the popular medical writer, long a stalwart of Johnson's publisher's lists, to whom *The Philosophical Quixote*, published anonymously in 1782, has recently been attributed.[44] But his main occupation involved absurd empirical experiments in the style of Swift's academy at Lagado. He makes attempts to render quicksilver solid at room temperature or to bake water 'with a view to its conversion into *earth*', and so on. The joke is that Wilkins has no interest in luciferous, mathematically grounded natural philosophy: 'He preferred the most trifling discovery, if it could be applied to *real use*, to the theory of a NEWTON; and would rather have been the discoverer of the loadstone, than of the system of gravitation.'[45] In other words *The Philosophical Quixote* is a satire on the sort of practice-focused 'useful knowledge' inquiry that defined early Industrial

Enlightenment thinking, and of which the members of the Lunar Society were high-profile exponents (though they belonged to a different social class to David Wilkins). It is evidence that writers from Johnson's stable who belonged to that intellectual milieu were willing to write self-satirically about its determined instrumentalism and about its peculiar atmosphere of obsession.

Another writer who appeared alongside the Edgeworths on Johnson's lists and who gives their work a valuable contemporary context is the poet William Cowper. Cowper represents a precedent for Maria's complicated attitude – at once semi-satirical, sympathetic and sceptical – to the intellectual world of the Industrial Enlightenment. He lived apart from Edgeworth and Lunar circles, but there were strong connections between the group and the retired poet. When Maria discussed her bookseller's extensive correspondence with her father at the end of *The Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, she mentioned as Johnson's chief claim to fame the regard that Cowper expresses for him elsewhere in his letters (Johnson was Cowper's publisher too). Cowper's patron and most loyal friend Joseph Hill lived outside the small Berkshire village of Hare Hatch, where he was the neighbour of Edgeworth and Day during the early 1770s.[46] Like the Edgeworths, Cowper was an attentive reader of Darwin's philosophical poems. When Johnson commissioned Cowper to write notices of Darwin's *Botanic Garden* (May 1791) and *Economy of Vegetation* (March 1793) in his *Analytic Review*, he combined the powers of his two most high-profile authors. Cowper showed his understanding of the Lunar milieu in the second review, which excerpts and comments upon *The Economy of Vegetation*, where Darwin describes the wonders of Wedgwood's Etruria pottery and of Boulton and James Watt's steam engine, 'with all its vast machinery and enormous powers'.[47]

In Book 3 of his great georgic poem of retirement *The Task*, however, Cowper had made clear that his attitude to Lunar science involved both admiration and quiet opposition. In a passage that describes the intellectual triumphs of his friend the lawyer Edward Thurlow, of the microscopist Henry Baker – co-founder of the Society of Arts – and of the Lunar scientists Franklin and Priestley, Cowper confesses that he is 'no proficient' in arts like theirs:

> [. . .] I cannot call the swift
> And perilous lightnings from the angry clouds,
> And bid them hide themselves in th' earth beneath,
> I cannot analyse the air, nor catch
> The parallax of yonder luminous point

> That seems half quench'd in the immense abyss;
> Such pow'rs I boast not—neither can I rest
> A silent witness of the headlong rage
> Or heedless folly by which thousands die.[48]

These protestations are part of the larger case that Cowper builds for his own life-choice of self-sequestered humanitarianism and literary employment – 'studious of laborious ease', as he puts it with a georgic flourish, 'Not slothful; happy to deceive the time | Not waste it'.[49] Whether or not Maria Edgeworth was influenced by it directly, there is a correspondence between Cowper's justification of his retirement ('seeming unemployed, | And censured oft as useless') and Edgeworth's denial to her hero Clarence Hervey of the opportunity to become 'permanently useful to his fellow-creatures' by taking on an active public life.

Belinda gets positive moral fortitude from her exposure to the vicious world of fashion inhabited by Lady Delacour. Hervey learns his own more conscience-troubling lessons by witnessing the effects of the deep retirement that he has imposed on Virginia St Pierre. It is an experiment in seclusion that enfeebles her psychologically, but which also reflects back in both negative and positive ways on Hervey's own choice for himself of a fashionable life over a more honourable public career. The satirical framing of this complicated didactic point by both Cowper and Edgeworth is important but easy to misinterpret. Critics of *The Task* warn that the parodic opening of Cowper's poem, in which Lady Austen sets the frivolous 'Task' of writing about her sofa, should not tempt readers to underestimate his earnestness about his retired calling and its spiritual meaning.[50] A similar reservation is required of Edgeworth's readers. *Belinda* is not a straightforward piece of advocacy for the 'useful knowledge' agenda of the Lunar Society or the broader Industrial Enlightenment. Its satirical components – in common with the satire of all the mock artists examined in the previous chapters – allow her to make some distinctive and subtle arguments about the psychology of creativity.

Erasmus Darwin on Animation and Intuitive Analogy

Edgeworth's thinking about the problems of female wit in *Letters for Literary Ladies* and *Belinda* is part of her more general interest in the psychology of creativity and imagination. What Edgeworth admired most in female intellectuals was a capacity to excite other women 'to reflect upon their own minds', as she wrote in her 1816 obituary for the Scottish educationalist Elizabeth Hamilton, 'and to observe what passes in the

minds of their children'.[51] An important context for this interest in psychological reflection was her encounter with Darwin's *Zoonomia* (1794–1796), his widely read study of 'the Operation of the Mind as a Science'. As we have seen, Darwin was a close friend of the Edgeworths. Darwin's first meeting with Maria's father in the summer of 1766 was the latter's entrée into the Lunar Society orbit, and it makes a set piece in his memoirs. 'How much of my future life has depended', he comments, 'upon this visit to Litchfield!'[52] During the visit Darwin wrote to Matthew Boulton of the natural-philosophical tricks that Edgeworth performed, declaring him the 'greatest Conjurer I ever saw [. . .] He has the principles of Nature in his Palm, and moulds them as he pleases.'[53] In their subsequent correspondence Darwin betrays his disappointment that Edgeworth's displays never came to much in the way of substantial work. Darwin invented projects for him, hoping in 1790, for example, that the younger man would publish a modern version of the Marquis of Worcester's *Century of Inventions* (1663), the early catalogue of mechanical devices.[54] During the final illness of Honora Sneyd, Richard Lovell's admired second wife, whom he met at Litchfield through his Lunar connections, it was Darwin who attended her as family physician.[55] Once Maria established herself as a writer she took her share in this family connection, accompanying her father on his last visit to Darwin at his home near Derby in 1799. The year before she had designed the extensive curriculum of reading for girls and young women that Darwin published as the final chapter of his *Plan for the Conduct of Female Education* (1797).[56] The last letter that Darwin wrote, left unfinished on the morning of his death on 17 April 1802, was to Richard Lovell.[57]

From her earliest publications Maria signalled her interest in Darwin's ideas. In *Letters for Literary Ladies* she wrote of how recent literature has enlisted science '*under the banners of imagination*', a phrase from Darwin's preface to his *Botanical Garden* (1791), and confirmed that 'her votaries' – that is, women readers engaged with natural philosophy – were following the path from his poetry to stricter modes of reasoning.[58] A more decisive influence on her thinking came from *Zoonomia*, the prose treatise in which Darwin set out observations that anticipated the concerns of nineteenth-century brain physiology, particularly with what would now be called extended cognition – the distribution of mental processes through the human sensorium – and the cognitive unconscious.[59] Darwin's ideas were rooted in David Hartley's experimental elaboration of the older 'association of ideas' theory. Among the wider Lunar group, Priestley had made this line of thinking more accessible to a general readership with his

popular abridgement (published in 1775 by Johnson) of Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749). Hartley's associationism described mental processes in terms of the pathways created by pattern-forming 'fibrous contractions' in the cerebrum and the motion of particles in the brain. Darwin transformed this basically mechanistic theory by extending it significantly, distinguishing between three larger classes of cognitive association: first, the simple neural contractions described by Hartley (mental '*association*' as such); second, neural contractions made by impulses from the senses ('*causation*'); and third, the complicated and reciprocal movements that happen when mental associations and sensory causations link together into 'progressive trains of tribes' of impulses ('*catenation*').[60]

Darwin's theory of 'catenation' is important because it represents the British Enlightenment's first systematic attempt to explain the personal, experience-based and often tacit forms of knowledge that preoccupied nearly all the authors of eighteenth-century mock-artistic satires, as we have seen throughout this book.[61] It allows him to explain the connection between what appear to be purely mental attainments, such as recollection, imagination or reasoning, and the haptic and personal knowledge displayed, in its various forms, by skilled technicians, performing artists and all sorts of ingenious and dexterous people. As befitted a physician whose closest intellectual associates were craftsman-engineers like Wedgwood, Boulton and Watt – his friends from the Lunar Society – Darwin understood something rarely considered by earlier philosophers. He saw that the processes involved in mechanical arts, quite apart from being simple, thoughtless and automatic, are in fact infinitely complex patterns of muscular and neural movement. These, 'when they are thus associated into tribes or trains', as Darwin explained, 'become afterwards not only obedient to volition, but to the sensations and irritations; and the same movement composes a part of many different tribes or trains of motion'.[62] Darwin was especially interested in how tacit, unconscious aptitudes are established and modified by will. The example of a young woman learning to play a piano was his favourite instance of the intermeshing of haptic, volitional and intellectual cognition in familiar processes:

> When we recollect the variety of mechanic arts, which are performed by associated trains of muscular actions catenated with the effects they produce, as in knitting, netting, weaving; and the greater variety of associated trains of ideas caused or catenated by volitions or sensations, as in our hourly modes of reasoning, or imagining, or recollecting, we shall gain some idea of the innumerable catenated trains and circles of action, which form the tenor of our lives, and which began, and will only cease entirely with them.[63]

Darwin's purpose in *Zoonomia* was to propose an appropriately complex theory of what connects automatic physiological processes, like digestion or the beating of the heart, with both unconscious habit and conscious reasoning, into the relatively smooth continuum of everyday experience. Where earlier associationist psychologists had explained 'the laws of life by those of mechanism, and chemistry', Darwin intended his theory to go a step closer to explaining a more essential, whole-body principle of 'animation'.[64] The phrase 'tenor of our lives' refers to this principle and suggests poetic sources for Darwin's thinking. It recalls a couplet from Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) – 'Along the cool sequestered vale of life | They kept the noiseless tenor of their way' – rural obscurity acting as a figure for everything that is tacit and hidden in the human experience of cognition.[65] Especially important to this newly holistic idea of brain physiology was Darwin's sense of how much of our thinking life involves mental 'volition without our attention to it'. The term he coined for such processes of unconscious reasoning was 'INTUITIVE ANALOGY'.[66] An example is the easy and automatic way our minds reject the strange images produced while dreaming. Darwin's interest in 'intuitive analogy' and other processes of the cognitive unconscious seem to have had a personal connection to his experience of speech impediments. Darwin's own 'stammer' taught him that mental association can have a negative correlation with the intensity of a person's voluntary mental exertions.[67]

The impact of Darwin's psychological theories on Maria Edgeworth is particularly evident in *Practical Education*. Chapter three, on 'Attention', the first section of that book to which Maria claimed authorship, contains a series of direct references to *Zoonomia*, most of them concerned with how brain physiology and 'configurations of the organs of sense' should be understood as the primary determiners of mental action. Like Darwin in his discussion of 'associate motions', Edgeworth begins her account of 'attention' with the examples of how people learn fencing, dancing and mechanical arts. She moves on quickly to some more engagingly gendered examples:

> Can any thing appear more easy than knitting, when we look at the dexterous rapid motions of an experienced practitioner? but let a gentleman take up a lady's knitting needles, and knitting appears to him, and to all the spectators, one of the most difficult and laborious operations imaginable. A lady who is learning to work with a tambour needle, puts her head down close to the tambour frame, the colour comes into her face, she strains her eyes, all her faculties are exerted, and perhaps she works at the rate of three

> links a minute. A week afterwards, probably, practice has made the work perfectly easy; the same lady goes rapidly on with her work; she can talk and laugh, and perhaps even think, whilst she works. She has now discovered that a number of the motions, and a great portion of that attention which she thought necessary to this mighty operation, may be advantageously spared.[68]

Edgeworth's pragmatic way with these observations is to emphasise how the multiplication of simultaneous actions in skilled processes, and the 'habit of abstracting the attention' that underlies them, is the product not of any special aptitude in the practitioner, but of practice and 'patient industry'. To the casual observer (and, Edgeworth hints, with a characteristically satirical touch, to the conceited expert practitioners themselves), a capacity to divide cognitive activities in this way can seem prodigious. When we see it done we are inclined to 'immediately attribute it to superiority of original genius'. Edgeworth joins Darwin in emphasising how such skills are both fascinatingly complex and personal, and also entirely everyday. In the chapter of *Practical Education* on 'Prudence and Economy' Edgeworth calls Darwin as expert witness on the rapid and unconscious chains of calculation involved in moral and social thinking. 'A modern philosopher calls this rapid species of reasoning "intuitive analogy"', she reports; 'applied to the business of life, the French call it tact.'[69] We mystify these processes of intuitive analogy by attributing them to genius or, in the case of 'tact', to indefinable instincts of social finesse. They are in fact ordinary, Edgeworth insists, though logically unspecifiable. If a dancer tried to explicate her art, 'thought would probably interrupt the operation', writes Edgeworth, 'and break the chain of associated actions'.[70] As soon as the craftsman reflects on the mechanical details of his trade, 'he cannot go on with them'. Edgeworth anticipates Michael Polanyi by a century and a half in these observations on the irreversible mechanisms of personal knowledge.[71]

As an author, Edgeworth is particularly interested in the implications of Darwin's psychology for her understanding of wit – of thinking, that is, at its most rapid and delicate. Darwin encouraged the Edgeworths to read Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (volume 1, 1792). Stewart's chapter on 'Attention' helped shape Edgeworth's ideas about fast thinking, as already they had shaped Darwin's on intuitive analogy.[72] Stewart distinguishes his theory of mind from those of earlier eighteenth-century psychologists, such as Bishop Berkeley, Hartley and Thomas Reid. They argued that the rapid cognition characteristic of personal knowledge operates through functions of the nervous system that are essentially

'mechanical', uninfluenced by conscious volition. From his own reflections on different kinds of rapid 'habits in which both mind and body are concerned', Stewart concludes that volition is in fact present in all sorts of apparently automatic cognitive processes. It is just that these acts of will 'pass through the mind so quickly, that we cannot, without difficulty, arrest our ideas in their rapid succession, and state them to others in their proper and logical order'.[73] In *Practical Education* Edgeworth refers directly to Stewart's theory, though she makes a different emphasis. As an educationalist what interests Edgeworth is the relation of fast cognition to prior processes of slow habituation and, at a social level, to the constant tensions and misunderstandings that spring up between fast and slow thinkers.[74] The most rapid display of wit 'is purely the result of practice', she argues, and we know this 'by observing the comparatively slow progress of our understandings in subjects to which we have not been accustomed: the progress of mind is there so slow, that we can count every step'.[75] Children who are most deeply drilled in logic are often slowest to understand witty expressions.[76] The charisma of rapid wit is something that Edgeworth feels keenly, and she understands the new psychological theories about its mechanisms. But in her own theoretical reflections she refuses to give precedence to speed alone. Fast and slow thinking, Edgeworth believes, belong together in the broad cognitive economy of social life.

Belinda, Darwin and Trials of Address

Edgeworth's interest in personal knowledge, 'intuitive analogy' and extended cognition carried over into her fiction writing. The psychological theories of Stewart and Darwin are especially relevant to her initial characterisation of Clarence Hervey, the chief male protagonist of the novel. Interestingly, these ideas are not developed fully in the later sections of *Belinda*, and her decision to drop them may indicate a final reservation about their significance. Indeed, from the start of the novel Hervey is presented as a person whose remarkable attainments have a doubtful shadow about them:

> Clarence Hervey might have been more than a pleasant young man, if he had not been smitten with the desire of being thought superior in every thing, and of being the most admired person in all companies. He had been early flattered with the idea that he was a man of genius; and he imagined that, as such, he was entitled to be imprudent, wild, and eccentric. He affected singularity, in order to establish his claims to genius. He had considerable literary talents, by which he was distinguished at Oxford; but

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> he was so dreadfully afraid of passing for a pedant, that when he came into the company of the idle and the ignorant, he pretended to disdain every species of knowledge.[77]

Why does Edgeworth not restrain her satirical impulses as she introduces Hervey, a character who must remain both desirable to her heroine and, by the novel's comic logic, eligible as well? The negative presentation of her hero's literary commitment is especially odd, given that in later episodes his most eccentric and apparently instinctive actions are framed, as we will see, by passages of quite dense reference to his book learning. Edgeworth's implication here would seem to be that vanity and affectation make Hervey unreliable. And yet she reserves the actual term 'vanity' for her female characters, while 'egotism' is a quality she attributes only to Hervey's romantic rival during the novel's later sections, the passionate and unreflective mixed-race Jamaican, Mr Vincent. Hervey's faults are redeemed, apparently, by the nature of his 'genius'. Once again, Edgeworth's signalling around this term is ambiguous. As we have seen, she is sceptical about the status of genius as a natural phenomenon. A central maxim of *Practical Education* is that 'virtues, as well as abilities, or what is popularly called genius', are 'the result of education, not the gift of nature'. This contradicts Hervey's idea of his genius as something given and innate, different to and preceding acquired knowledge.[78] Edgeworth's scepticism is consistent with Erasmus Darwin's idea of genius as a facet of 'temperaments of increased Voluntarity', marked by nothing more mysterious than increased powers of attention and labour.[79] On the other hand, in *Belinda* genius seems to be an indispensable quality in the heroine's choice of her partner. In a low moment, Belinda Portman fears 'to indulge the romantic hope of ever being loved by a man of superior genius and virtue' and reflects that Clarence Hervey is the only person of that description she has met.[80] Edgeworth presents 'genius' as artificial but also one of the few legitimate objects of her heroine's desire.

In the opening chapters of *Belinda* Edgeworth creates a series of elaborate trials for Clarence Hervey's genius, each presenting a test of interpretation for the reader as well. These episodes explore some of the psychological topics that Edgeworth read about in Darwin's *Zoonomia*. They are concerned with haptic skills and their natural and artificial sources, and with the relationship those sources may have with mental agility, spontaneous wit and a capacity for 'natural analogy'. The most curious of Hervey's challenges happens in chapter VII, set in Hyde Park, where he provokes the envy of his rakish companions – Sir Philip Baddely, Rochfort and St George – by showing off 'the real superiority of his talents,

and by his perpetually taking the lead in those trifles which were beneath his ambition'.[81] Hervey triumphs in a wine-tasting competition and again in a walking competition. He is less successful, however, when challenged by his companions to a swimming race. Swimming belongs to the class of attention-abstracting acquired motions that Edgeworth discusses in *Practical Education*. It takes Hervey, who has never learned to do it, to the limits of his genius when he throws off his coat, plunges into the Serpentine and finds himself in difficulty. His friends do nothing, and our hero is saved from drowning only when the virtuous Mr Percival and Dr X arrive.

The episode has a literary background. Hervey makes his attempt in the water because he 'had in his confused head some recollection of an essay of Dr. Franklin on swimming, by which he fancied that he could ensure at once his safety and his fame'. Partly this statement is comical, given that swimming is, like fencing and dancing, a haptic art, unattainable through written instruction. It is also plausible: Benjamin Franklin offered instructions in his *Experiments and Observations* (1751; fourth edition, the first to include Letter LV on swimming, 1769) on how non-swimmers who fall accidentally into water might avoid drowning (by having 'presence of mind sufficient to avoid struggling and plunging').[82] In his writings he tended to downplay how much instruction swimming requires. The passage in Franklin's autobiography where he swims from Chelsea to Blackfriars Bridge, making a Hervey-esque display for his friends of 'a variety of feats of activity and address, both upon the surface of the water as well as under it', itself has a literary frame. 'I knew, and could execute, all the evolutions and positions of Thevenot', Franklin reports, referring to Melchisédech Thévenot's *Art of Swimming* (1696); 'and I added to them some of my own invention.'[83] Once again, Maria Edgeworth seems to deploy with satirical intent a theme with literary and Lunar Society associations. As was the case with the serpent costume at the ball, the insufficiency of Hervey's invention and his tendency to over-rate it, are targets of ridicule. His affectation of 'disdain [for] every species of knowledge' is put under pressure by Edgeworth's careful arrangement of literary objects through the episode, Franklin's half-read writings among them. It appears that Hervey's real accomplishments are not the products of natural talent but of his solid (though disavowed) reading and education.

The authority of literary culture in *Belinda*'s scheme of knowledge is given further satirical pointing when Dr X, who is a celebrated author and later mentor to Hervey, appears on the scene. Hervey's thick-witted companions have a superstitious fear of the doctor somehow capturing

them in print: 'and curse me', cries Sir Philip, 'if I should choose to meet with myself in a book' ('no danger of that', Rochfort reassures him, 'if one never opens one').[84] Sir Philip does turn out at this point to be a fan of Smollett's rowdiest novel: 'In point of famousness, I'd sport my random against that ever were read or written, damn me.'[85] Edgworth positions Hervey somewhere between the near-illiteracy of his companions and the writerly authority of Dr X. Is she doing more than showing, quite conventionally, that a little learning, if that is all Hervey has, can be a dangerous thing? Her broader point, perhaps, is that haptic accomplishments (like swimming or like the artistic accomplishments Belinda is reluctant to display) connect with the scientific and literary accomplishments of a Dr X by virtue of the quality of patient attention that they require. 'Those who believe themselves endowed with genius', Edgeworth wrote in *Practical Education*, 'expect to find a royal road in every science shorter, and less laborious, than the beaten paths of industry.'[86] Her illustrations for the positive corollary to this maxim are all literary careers – Pope, Voltaire, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Franklin again. Books and literary culture may appear antithetical to the spontaneity and address of natural 'genius', but Edgeworth argues that they have a necessary connection.

After the Serpentine episode Edgeworth returns, in chapter IX ('Advice'), to this same triangulation of themes – genius, literature and cultivated skill – when Dr X attends a party at Lady Delacour's house. Clarence Hervey wants the doctor to do a moral audit on Belinda, who mercifully has 'the good sense and good taste to avoid a display of her abilities and accomplishments' on this occasion.[87] Not so Hervey. Lady Delacour's star guest, a Spanish gentleman, entertains the party with stories of his countrymen's passion for chess, but Hervey soon outperforms him:

> Nothing amusing or instructive that could be said upon the game of chess escaped him, and the literary ground, which the slow don would have taken some hours to go regularly over, our hero traversed in a few minutes. From Twiss to Vida, from Irwin to sir William Jones, from Spain to India, he passed with admirable celerity, and seized all that could adorn his course from Indian Antiquities or Asiatic researches.[88]

The Spaniard challenges Hervey to prove he is as perfect in his practice of chess as he is in its theory. After an early blunder in their game (he is distracted by Belinda) Edgeworth's hero recovers his poise and is at length, 'to the surprise of all present', victorious. Hervey is insufferable. One is reminded painfully of the comments made in the 1810s about the aging Richard Lovell's similarly puppyish displays (Lord Byron: 'Edgeworth

bounced about, and talked loud and long [. . .] He was not much admired in London').[89] Maria, who was devoted to her father, perhaps added some satirical grit when she half-based Hervey's character on his. The uncertainty of tone – half-satirical, half-didactic – is one aspect of Edgeworth's often hectic inventiveness in the opening chapters of *Belinda*.

What is clear is that the chess episode forms a pattern with the scenes at the Serpentine. Once again, Hervey's book learning, his 'genius' for conversation and his skilfulness in exercises of address are brought together in a comic set-piece. There has been an adjustment, however, since Hyde Park. The display of Hervey's wide reading now has priority. In the chess episode Hervey's pride and competitiveness are still evident, but they have been subject to moral conditioning. In his essay on the 'Morals of Chess' Benjamin Franklin, who was a keen player, proposed that the game forms

> the habit of *not being discouraged by present bad appearances in the state of our affairs*, the habit of *hoping for a favourable change*, and that of *persevering in the search of resources*.[90]

Edgeworth shows Hervey finding these qualities within himself almost spontaneously. Her instinct seems to be as didactic as Franklin's. She wants her hero to take steps forward both in moral development and in the successfulness of his performances. She also wants to dissemble that didacticism where she can, jamming the instructive signal with satire. Commentators on *Belinda* have tended to attribute the thinking behind Clarence Hervey's trials-of-address scenes to Edgeworth's imputed commitment to experimental principle and methodological openness. These can be linked in turn back to Edgeworth's Lunar Society milieu and, more generally, to the Industrial Enlightenment's scientific culture of objectivity.[91] As a context for her ideas this is important, but it does not account for her insistence on connecting Hervey's apparently spontaneous 'genius' back to a broader literary culture nor for the giddy atmosphere of satire that pervades these early episodes of her novel.

A more specific explanation for Edgeworth's hectic style in these sections – and one consistent with Lunar Society methodology – is that she is introducing a certain capriciousness into the actions of her characters. This broadens the moral evidence base of her fiction. Hervey's eccentricity is significant because it allows Edgeworth to diversify the social data and the evidence of divergent human character that she presents to her readers. She does this without abandoning the moral centre ground almost lost to the novel's most determinedly extravagant characters, Lady Delacour and Harriet Freke. Edgeworth's position corresponds with the

defence of complete freedom of thought made by Priestley in his educational writings:

> if we argue from the analogy of education to other arts which are most similar to it, we can never expect to see human nature, about which it is employed, brought to perfection, but in consequence of indulging unbounded liberty, and even caprice in conducting it. The power of nature in producing plants cannot be shown to advantage, but in all possible circumstances of culture. The richest colours, the most fragrant scents, and the most exquisite flavours, which our present gardens and orchards exhibit, would never have been known, if florists and gardeners had been confined in the processes of cultivation; nay if they had not been allowed the utmost licentiousness of fancy in the exercise of their arts.[92]

A free and capricious approach to learning might produce the occasional social oddity, Priestley allows, but 'the various business of human life may afford proper spheres for such eccentric geniuses'. Erasmus Darwin made corresponding arguments in his preface to *The Botanic Garden* (1791) for deploying 'the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry' on the reasoned descriptions of natural philosophy. Extravagant expressions are valuable 'since natural objects are allied to each other by many affinities, [and] every kind of theoretic distribution of them adds to our knowledge by developing some of their analogies'.[93] Edgeworth is more conservative both socially and intellectually than either Priestley or Darwin, as her educational writings show. But she recognises the scale between restriction and freedom that they establish. Edgeworth sets out in her chapter on taste and imagination in the second volume of *Practical Education* to 'define the boundaries between the enthusiasm of genius, and its extravagance; and to show some of the precautions which may be used, to prevent the moral defects to which persons of ardent imagination are usually subject'.[94] She acknowledges the indispensability of enthusiasm to the work of actors, poets and soldiers, and is reluctant to 'determine what degree, or what habits of imagination, are desirable' when accommodating their cases to educational theory. *Belinda* marks a loosening of her opinions on these questions, but she remains true to her stated pedagogic principles.

Personal and Impersonal Experiment

One of the curious things about *Belinda*'s structure is that these trials-of-address episodes seem to fade into the background of the novel's second half, after they have done so much to establish a satirical mood in its opening chapters. The obvious explanation for this is that Edgeworth

needs to remove the narrative focus from their protagonist, Clarence Hervey, so that she can develop subplots for Belinda at Oakley Park, home of the Percivals, and for Virginia St Pierre's at her retreat near Windsor (a few miles away from the former Edgeworth residence at Hare Hatch). Another likely reason is that Edgeworth found herself unable to make the trial episodes relevant to the development of her heroine. Extravagant and capricious gestures of the sort that Priestley and Darwin argued were crucial to progressive morality, and in which Hervey specialises, are not available to Edgeworth's leading female character, for the reasons of propriety set out in *Letters for Literary Ladies*. Neither can *Belinda*'s extraordinary women of wit – Lady Delacour, Selina Stanhope, Harriet Freke – make themselves heroes of the novel, on account of the status of their lives as failed experiments in witty extravagance. Lady Delacour's restless social performances are connected too closely with her mental anguish to be anything other than a warning for her protégé Belinda. Harriet Freke represents the wildness of exuberant wit when it is untethered from moral reasoning and cultural prejudice. She evolves in chapter XVII ('Rights of Woman') from a dashing buffoon into a mock mentor with genuinely malicious intentions towards Belinda. Belinda must find a safe passage through society with these negative examples as her main points of navigation – although in the end the Percival family provide positive orientation as well.

On her entry into society Belinda Portman is faced with a problem. How can she find an active and honourable place for herself in the world without justifying the almost universal suspicion that she is artful and artificial?[95] For Belinda, unlike Hervey, 'accomplishments' are something less than an opportunity to exercise genius, wit or intuitive analogy. They are occasions for mortification. '"Belinda Portman, and her accomplishments, I'll swear, were as well advertised, as Packwood's razor strops"', says Hervey in her hearing; '"Do you forget"', she repeats back to him soon afterwards, '"that Belinda Portman and her accomplishments have already been as well advertised as Packwood's razor strops?"'[96] This is the reason, it seems, why Edgeworth is reluctant to let us see Belinda displaying the conventional accomplishments of an educated young woman, one brief episode excepted in which we see her drawing.[97] Her heroism is all in her judgements, her conversation and a sort of vernacular Stoicism that manifests as library-bound retreat.

One explanation for Edgeworth's decision at the end of the novel to resolve the marriage plot between Belinda and Clarence Hervey, despite the latter's clownishness and poor judgement, is that he completes

something in her that social convention leaves painfully unresolved. Hervey is a feminised man, uncertain of his status. He is trapped in a constant round of social display, desperate to demonstrate his skilfulness and genius, and at last sent out into the word as a barely convincing image of what an ambitious, educated woman might desire for herself. The final trial of his address – the sequestration and instruction of Virginia St Pierre – corresponds and contrasts with Belinda's own project of self-fashioning. With Virginia, Hervey attempts to create a natural woman by artificial means: 'The idea of attaching a perfectly pure, disinterested, unpractised heart, was delightful to his imagination: the cultivation of her understanding, he thought, would be an easy and a pleasing task.'[98] At almost the same time, Belinda tries to construct herself as a woman in a hazardously artificial world by the nearest thing to natural means available to her. As Anne Percival comments, fashionable society is dangerous for Belinda – but then 'some young people learn prudence by being placed in dangerous situations, as some young horses [. . .] learn to be sure footed, by being left to pick their own way on bad roads'.[99] This is the novel's key statement on Belinda's moral education. Edgeworth gives Clarence Hervey the job of reducing it to a theory – although Hervey does not immediately perceive its application to Belinda. Commenting on his own quest for sure-footedness, he tells Lady Delacour:

> The characters of those who are taught by their own experience must be progressive in knowledge and virtue. Those who learn from the experience of others may become stationary, because they must depend for their progress on the experiments that we brave volunteers, at whose expense they are to live and learn, are pleased to try [. . .] it seems to me, to be rather an ignominious than an enviable situation [. . .] It is my theory, that vigorous, quick-shooting intellects, during the periods of their growth, are sometimes awkwardly and ridiculously out of all *moral proportion*. Injudicious attempts to reduce and rectify them only dwarf or deform the character.[100]

Hervey is talking of himself, but the comment is relevant to Belinda as well. She may be 'stationary' in fashionable London and at Oakley Park, but Edgeworth makes it difficult to extend Hervey's charge of vicariousness and passivity to her. His statement is also significant because it comes at a point in the novel when its early awkward and ridiculous episodes, which focus on Hervey's trials of address, connect up with the less fast-moving (or even 'stationary') sections in the second half of the novel, featuring Belinda at Oakley Park. These present a more positive didactic of 'knowledge and virtue'. The 'quick-shooting intellects' expressed by satire

and wit have a place in this scheme, and Priestley and Darwin would approve Hervey's insistence that their extravagance should not be restrained. Edgeworth uses a vocabulary of '*moral proportion*' derived from the ethical writings of the Earl of Shaftesbury and his followers to justify the tendency to orderliness of an apparently extravagant course of action and thinking.[101] As was the case for Shaftesbury, satire has a double place within this scheme: both as an expression of intellectual energy through wit and as a normalising force that can restrict the excesses of that energy through ridicule.[102] Clarence Hervey is self-conscious about his own ridiculousness – his own status, that is, as an object of satire – but he argues that the relative ignominy of the situation lies with the passive satirical observer rather than with 'brave volunteer' who is willing to risk making a fool of himself.

Where does this leave Belinda Portman? As a woman confined by the gender expectations described in *Letters for Literary Ladies*, is she condemned to belong to Clarence Hervey's class of those 'who learn from the experience of others', rather than from her own social experiments? It seems that Edgeworth expects her readers to see Belinda's trials of sure-footedness among the dangers of fashionable society as valid sources of personal and experiential knowledge. Belinda's development as a female character is much closer than Hervey's to the novel's satirical heart and to its development as a self-reflexive text. Belinda does not have the luxury that Hervey enjoys as a man of rejecting (however provisionally) the secondary knowledge provided by literature. Her retreat to the Delacours' library when fashionable London becomes too much foreshadows her ultimately successful project of moral self-realisation ('She was fond of reading', we are told, 'and disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity').[103] Literature and self-sufficiency have a strong casual relation, then, but Edgeworth works hard to show that it is not a necessary one, and that it is attended with many dangers.[104]

In *Belinda* Edgeworth proposes that the relationships witty women have with their books can be self-creative, but they can also be pathological. As a man Clarence Hervey can play at pretending 'to disdain every species of knowledge' to the frivolous end of appearing the anti-pedant to his illiterate friends. For women the stakes involved with literary culture are always higher, according to Edgeworth, because books are their main point of access to worldly knowledge – for better or (more often) for worse. In the case of Lady Delacour, when her hypochondria deepens into something resembling depression she devotes herself, with a frenzy of annotation and line marking, to 'methodistical titles'. This surprising taste

for 'quaint' religious books is inherited from her mother. Its pathological tendency is evident from Lady Delacour's attempts to dissemble her genuine religious enthusiasm by pretending that she reads them as an act of practical satire. Taking her at her word, Belinda concludes that 'the marks of approbation in these books were ironical', where they are in fact sincere.[105] Lady Delacour makes devotional tracts into the opposite of mock arts. In her hands they are manuals with a religious function that needs to be covered over with the pretence of satire, irony inverting irony.

In the case of Harriet Freke, there is a contortion of opinion in the opposite direction. During their confrontation at Oakley Park, Harriet disguises her reading, assuming the pose of an anti-intellectual *esprit fort*. She tries to shock Belinda by asserting her preference for strong devils over weak angels:

> 'You forget', said Belinda, 'that it is not Milton, but Satan, who says, "Fallen spirit, to be weak is to be miserable".'
>
> 'You read I see! I did not know you were a reading girl. So was I once! but I never read now. Books only spoil the originality of genius. Very well for those who can't think for themselves—but when one has made up one's opinions, there is no use in reading.'
>
> 'But to *make* them up', replied Belinda, 'may it not be useful?'
>
> 'Of no use upon earth to minds of a certain class. You, who can think for yourself, should never read.'
>
> 'But I read that I may think for myself.'[106]

The italicisation of '*make*' is likely to be authorial, because it is so particular. By trying to clarify what Belinda is talking about here – the making up of opinions, rather than 'making up' stories – Edgeworth shows both her awareness and tolerance of the verbal ambiguity. Belinda affirms once again a conventional learning process against an aggressive assertion of learning as primarily socialised and performative. 'Books are full of trash', Harriet continues; 'conversation is worth all the books in the world.' Reading to think for oneself, as proposed by Belinda, is a contrastingly personal and coherent agenda for the making up of a mind.

Belinda's third case of a woman character with a reading pathology, Virginia St Pierre, represents the opposite of Harriet Freke's conversational libertarianism. Virginia is the victim of an unlucky series of attempts by different people – her grandmother, her keeper Mrs. Ormond and her grooming guardian Clarence Hervey – to 'reduce and rectify' the social information to which she has access. Hers is an extreme manifestation of

the position understood in *Letters for Literary Ladies* as characteristic of the female learner. 'As she had never seen any thing of society, all her notions were drawn from books', Clarence Hervey tells us; 'the severe restrictions which her grandmother had early laid upon the choice of these seemed to have awakened her curiosity, and to have increased her appetite for books—it was insatiable.'[107] Edgeworth is content to present Virginia in what were by 1801 familiar comic terms. She is a version of the female Quixote, the book-addicted and deluded idealist. Her literary appetites are directed, super-conventionally, towards romances, rather than to any of the increasingly diverse obsessions of other Enlightenment Quixotes.[108] Virginia is aware that even the name assigned to her by Hervey is a peculiar grafting together of elements from the title page of a 'romance' book, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788). What makes her different from other literary Quixotes is that her obsessive misunderstanding of the world is not the pathological response to trauma or boredom of a previously healthy mind. It is the consequence of an extreme and wholly ill-advised educational experiment for which she is blameless. Virginia's situation is the result of multi-generational Quixotism. First, her real mother is betrayed into a rash early marriage (with Mr Hartley), having been 'spoiled by early novel-reading'; next, Clarence Hervey restricts her inputs of social information to literary romances because he has made his own Quixotic over-estimation of the value of another literary model.[109] Like Edgeworth's father and Thomas Day, Hervey reads Rousseau's *Emile* and is so 'charmed with the picture of Sophia', Emile's wife-to-be, that 'he formed the romantic project of educating a wife for himself'.[110] As the project fails, Edgeworth takes Hervey's attempt at a natural education through unnatural means to its illogical and entirely artificial conclusion. Virginia falls in love with Captain Sunderland by looking at his picture – itself a romance motif borrowed from the *Arabian Nights* – while the captain falls for Virginia by viewing her through a telescope.[111] The Virginia sub-plot resolves into a happy ending, but its function is to mark another undesirable extreme in the artificial formation of female minds though the literary culture of which the novel is itself a part.

Fast Arts and Slow Ends

Through the sub-plots and digressions that complicate *Belinda*, Edgeworth keeps in touch with the ideas that animate the novel's opening passages. Wit, intelligence and the different methods of cultivating them are what interest her at the start. These themes metastasise in her style as deposits of

satire left between layers of fashionable social observation. Edgeworth is particularly concerned with the sources of wit in personal 'genius' and practical education. She looks into their relations (as prompted by her reading of Darwin) with the catenated cognitive impulses of sensation, skilled habit and reason. She pays particular attention to their irregular distribution between the sexes. As we have seen, these investigations of wit are framed often with references to literary culture, and for Edgeworth's female characters especially there are both positive opportunities and real hazards involved with that engagement. The issue of the cultivation of wit and intelligence connects *Belinda* back to Edgeworth's pedagogic theory, which also leaves its traces when she slips into a more didactic mode. In some episodes, for example those that feature Clarence Hervey's trials of depthless dexterous ingenuity, her didacticism and irony combine in a way that recalls her early-career experiments in mock-artistic satire.

As the novel draws towards its end, the evolution of Edgeworth's thinking about female wit affects her writing most directly in her handling of narrative pace. The early chapters of *Belinda* proceed at a hectic rate. Chapter IV, for example, is especially frantic, jumping between general elections, female duels and turkey-driving competitions. The speed of the storytelling expresses the quickness of its witty protagonists' minds, especially when Lady Delacour is narrator. She has a trick of dominating conversations by hurrying her interlocutors through chains of thought, over which inevitably they stumble.[112] Clarence Hervey does something similar when he out-shines the visiting Spanish diplomat (the 'slow Don') with a rapid torrent of history and anecdote about chess. In the game that they play, as in his other trials of social performance, Hervey gets the better of a more practiced opponent because he has a strange knack for the rapid or instant apprehension of skillful processes.

In the closing sections of *Belinda* there is a marked rallentando in the narrative rhythms, as even the cleverest characters recognise that they need to slow down. Lord Delacour, a person of ordinary parts made miserable by an exceptionally quick-witted wife, emerges as someone possessed of 'every accomplishment under the sun' when his new friend Mr Percival, who is 'capable of estimating *the potential*, as well as *the actual range*' of his mind, gives him the time to come out of himself. Virginia St Pierre, a child of 'natural indolence' with a 'slow manner', is cowed by Hervey's hurry to breed her up as his partner in wit and originality ('"Nothing is so tiresome to a man of any taste or abilities as what *every body knows*"', he declares; '"I am rather desirous to have a wife who has an uncommon than a common understanding"').[113] At last she is allowed to confess to him that 'I have no

genius' and is released to her father Mr Hartley – whose intellects were previously deranged by 'not sooner recovering his child'.[114] In *Belinda*'s very last scene, Edgeworth emphasises this narrative slow-down by making a joke of Lady Delacour's impatience ('Shall I finish the novel for you?') to get everyone married off or otherwise settled. Belinda joins her outside the fourth wall:

> 'But I hope you will remember, dear lady Delacour', said Belinda, 'that there is nothing in which novellists are so apt to err, as in hurrying things toward the conclusion. In not allowing *time* enough for that change of feeling, which change of situation cannot instantly produce.'[115]

Belinda is granted '*time* enough to become accustomed to Clarence', who with Captain Sunderland is bundled off to sea while she settles her feelings about him, and Lady Delacour quotes Pope's mock art *Peri Bathous* ('"annihilate both space and time [. . .]"') to heighten the irony of asserting a naturalistic psychology through literary artificiality.[116] What Lady Delacour has learned by *Belinda*'s final scene is that there is a cognitive economy in her society, in which the roles of actor and audience, of original genius and patient instructor, of thinkers fast and slow, need to be shared out more equitably than they were during her reign as queen wit of fashionable London.

Like the other eighteenth-century satires and novels discussed in this book, *Belinda* is an artistic work, in the simple sense that Edgeworth wrote it to stand for itself as a literary artefact, rather than to fulfil any distinct external end. Although it can look in certain lights like a how-to manual, or a secular homily, or an educational instrument, those aspects do not define it, and I have emphasised in this chapter their ambivalent position within the work's comic and satirical framing. *Belinda* is a novel. Edgeworth was famously reluctant to use that label, preferring to call it a 'tale'. We take her too much at her own word, though, if we identify *Belinda* generically with the shorter didactic and philosophical tales characteristic of Enlightenment literary culture or her own educational writings.[117] A better approach is that of Anna Letitia Barbauld, who paid lip service to the author's preferred label (writing of 'the agreeable tales of Miss Edgeworth'), but who read *Belinda* as a significant advance in the 'progress of novel writing' and canonised its author among *The British Novelists*.[118] Edgeworth's thinking about the instrumental tendency of her own writing and about its position within a broader culture of useful knowledge was always more nuanced than her critics thought.[119] By classifying *Belinda* as a novel, her friend Barbauld commits the work

to an essentially artistic genre that is capable of accommodating that strong tendency to didacticism-within-irony. Edgeworth was a child of the Industrial Enlightenment. She was a second-generation scion of the Lunar Society, a visitor to the factories of Birmingham, the daughter of a mechanical enthusiast. She had every opportunity to write directly about the shifts in mechanical technology, manufacturing productivity and natural philosophy that were happening all around her social milieu.[120] That she chose not to is an indication of the coherence of her thinking, not of a failure to engage.

What she did was to create a self-reflexive literary discourse of wit, ingenuity and invention that stood for itself alongside Darwin's and Stewart's more systematic theories of mind. It is telling that throughout her literary career she represented her authorship as a kind of skilful manufacturing, in contrast with the contribution of raw ideas provided by Richard Lovell. In 1795 she wrote to Margaret Ruxton about the new telegraph machine that he was developing: 'My father will allow me to manufacture an essay on the Logograph, he furnishing the solid materials and I spinning them.'[121] Politely refusing an invitation (not extended to her father) from Richard Jeffrey to contribute to *The Edinburgh Review*, she protested in 1806 that a 'certain quantity of bullion was given to me and I coined it into as many pieces as I thought would be convenient for popular use'.[122] 'All the general ideas originated with him', she wrote in the *Memoirs*, 'the illustrating and manufacturing them, if I may use the expression, was mine.'[123] These expressions have been understood as aggravated modesty tropes – as anxious betrayals by Edgeworth of her sense that the real source of her productivity is also a point of self-alienation.[124] It is possible to acknowledge those implications, however, while also reading them in a more positive way. Spinning, coining and printing are processes that greatly multiply the value of unrefined materials. The mechanical skills that they entail represent art, ingenuity and personal knowledge. All three metaphors connect to Maria Edgeworth's expertise as a writer: the technology of communication, the imposition of signs and characters, the making of books. In the context of the Industrial Enlightenment they are tokens of Edgeworth's growing belief in herself as a literary manufacturer.