

BOOK FORUM

More of a Question than a Comment: A Response to *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, by Joe Cleary

Mary McGlynn

English, Baruch College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, NY, USA
Email: Mary.McGlynn@baruch.cuny.edu

Abstract

This entry in the dossier about Joe Cleary's *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* asks questions about it based on recent scholarship by others working with the same key terms. The scholarship of David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Mary Burke provides productive interplays with Cleary's readings, revealing strengths of the current volume as well as sites for further investigation.

Keywords: modernism; world literature; empire; capitalism; postcolonial; epic; Anglophone

The dreaded moment after the conference panel: an audience member approaches the microphone and addresses you by name. You sit up a little straighter, nod your gratitude for the thanks being given for your presentation, and ready yourself to clarify one of the points you'd offered, intra-presentation, to expand upon. And then: "This is more of a comment than a question..." and off we go, quite easily somewhere smart and worth considering, but not about *your* presentation at all. We've all had this experience, and I do not want to do this to Joe Cleary and his engrossing book, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, tempting as it feels. As someone who works mainly on texts written in the last quarter century, I could easily redirect toward my comfort zone, considering the neo-liberal frameworks, cruel optimisms, and Americanized cultural outputs that succeed the period that Cleary covers, reading the book as an artifact of our own post-crisis moment of ongoing inequality and precarity during a financialization phase in one of Giovanni Arrighi's *longue duree* cycles of accumulation. Or, I could put on my formalist garb and offer alternate close readings of his exemplary texts, though I'd be hard pressed to do it more deftly. I could approach the book

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

through a more strictly Irish lens. But particularly as Cleary is himself partial to the rhetorical possibilities of the question as a dialectical device, I come to this book eager to ask it sincere questions on its own terms.

In a volume whose absence of subtitle proclaims its scope, Cleary traces a highly canonical path through the modernist juncture in literary evolution, reading empire from a vantage that views individual and national motivations through a lens more concerned with distributions of capital than hierarchies of class. In a sweeping argument with disciplinary and historical breadth, *MEWL* contends that the status of Paris and London as literary centers of a global world literature was changed utterly by the modernist period. Offering some geopolitical and economic contexts for this—the decline of the imperial holdings of France and the United Kingdom, their relative impoverishment due to financial and human costs of World War I (WWI), the rise of Moscow and the Soviet Union as a competing locus for cultural production—Cleary provides an alternative to Pascale Casanova's system in *The World Republic of Letters* in which the peripheries do not endlessly supplicate and strengthen the center but rather supplant it. As the supplanters here are Dublin and New York, the mechanisms and motives differ: the first is a decolonizing capital still in a close economic relationship with London, and the second is not even a national or military capital but rather a financial and cultural one. If, as Cleary puts it, “a revolt by two minor Anglophone peripheral literatures” gets “converted ... into a new form of cultural capital stockpiled by a new metropolitan power”,¹ the outcome appears to have been a dethroning of London to the benefit of New York, with an assist by Dublin.² “‘Modernism’ is the name we now assign to that new aesthetic code through which the transformation in English letters that shifted Anglophone literary supremacy from London to New York was effected”.³ What does Dublin gain from this? As a colonial outpost long on the losing side of most power struggles, in theory we can see it having backed the right horse, having bet on the United States to best the United Kingdom. Such a framing does, however, lead to questions about the relationship of literary modernism to the other artistic modes as well as to those in other linguistic traditions.

I imagine other respondents may articulate concerns about the exclusively male list of authors and the near-total whiteness, and I do find myself recurrently aware of these demographic features. I wonder about the ways the argument might extend or be reshaped by fuller consideration of Rabindranath Tagore, Gertrude Stein, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Djuna Barnes, William Faulkner, and Jean Rhys (this last being a postcolonial Caribbean feminist whose creativity is associated less with London than Paris). Given the book's discussions of race in particular, we know Cleary is not unaware of these frames, and we can read his treatment of James, Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Fitzgerald, and O'Neill as an exploration of how even what are often perceived as the most conservative, elitist, or non-inclusive versions of our literary history contain within them

¹ Cleary, Joe. *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 13.

² Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 13.

³ Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 15.

revolutionary impulses, perhaps all the more successful for their relative resemblance to the system against which they press.

To engage this book on its own terms requires a moment with its keywords—Anglophone; modernism; world literature; empire; capitalism; postcolonial; epic. Any one of these terms could evince a full-fledged engagement with *MEWL*, and I am well aware that my engagement is inevitably far less immersive because of my choice to take up so many of them. I group the keywords with interlocutors, in effect asking Cleary's book to respond to their positions: here I think of the numerous takes on world literature since Casanova, including David Damrosch (*What is World Literature?* 2003) and Emily Apter (*Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, 2013). Warwick Research Collective's 2015 book, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, offers a historical materialist dimension to the world literature considerations. I will engage the help of Mary Burke with the next keyword, modernism, as she has just published *Race, Politics, and Irish America: A Gothic History* (2022), which generates productive differences in focus and approach from Cleary's book. Since *MEWL* relies on the idea of epic, both scope and genre, I also want to draw on Franco Moretti's *The Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez* (1996) as an interlocutor. Finally, for questions of empire and postcolonialism, I will activate Cleary's own earlier work, which I read as foundational to his methods here but also raising questions of its own.

Since Cleary begins by laying out what he sees as the limits to Casanova's schema, leaving aside her interest in major and minor languages/literatures and focusing on English alone, I'm curious how he would respond to the questions she would ask about why. This question feels particularly pertinent in the years he discusses, as Ireland worked to revive not just Celtic culture but the Irish language, and in the United States, a proliferation of languages of immigrants evinced the beginnings of reactionary and racist English-only movements. Relatedly, Apter has proposed we talk about "world literatures," in acknowledgement of what she calls "untranslatability" as well as the insufficient attention to periodization and temporality.⁴ Cleary engages with her concerns in part via his own discussion of the untranslated quotations in *The Waste Land*, arguing that despite its "polyglot variety, ... English engorges other languages, and renders them minor, just as 'global English' would do as the century proceeded and as France and French" lost their "supereminence." The untranslated passages thus appear "impossibly learned and esoteric" even when actually "trite".⁵ Does this explanation of the dominance of English as a global language account for the choice not to look beyond the Anglophone, or does it capitulate to that very force?

Damrosch responded to Casanova with a question of his own, *What is World Literature?*, complete with his own reply: "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin",⁶ a concept that Cleary shows to be problematic when the contours of a culture of origin are not themselves easy to delineate. Eliot is

⁴ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2014).

⁵ Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 144.

⁶ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

American-born and educated but lives and works in Britain; Cleary makes a compelling case to read him and Henry James both as European in a way not available to someone English or Italian. We can also, queasily, wonder about someone like Wyndham Lewis, born of one American and one British parent and continually in overlap and dialogue with so many of Cleary's subjects. As Lewis emigrated to the United States in the late 1930s, he developed arguments about America's eventual cultural dominance not that different from Cleary's, or my own, ideas that introduce multiplicity to the idea of "culture of origin" from the perspective of social hierarchy. If we look across the twentieth century, we can trace an ongoing and increasing convergence of American and Irish cultural interplays, such that it was insightful but hardly controversial for Fintan O'Toole to argue, in 1997, that "the notion of American itself is an Irish invention, the notion of Ireland an American invention."⁷ As I argue recurrently, some portion of this affiliation is borne of Ireland's ill fit with the conventional Marxist outlines of class struggle, which made it feel sensible to align with a place that downplayed class, advancing narratives of social mobility and the "American Dream," however limited genuine access to these ideals was for most of the nation. The murkiness of class distinctions works with the murkiness of national affiliations to challenge Damrosch's seemingly straightforward definition of world literature.

Setting aside this concern, we see that for Damrosch, circulation is a key term to which he returns, claiming that "world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material".⁸ How does *MEWL*, interested as it is in the way that origins complicate and shape evaluations of a national literary landscape, value the idea of circulation? Would Cleary argue instead for world literature as a system, as do Moretti and WReC? We might see compatibility with Damrosch when Cleary raises questions of the goals of importing texts into new contexts and points out that "Joyce was well aware that collaborations were commonly strategic ways of recruiting coterie of writers to serve particular purposes".⁹ The point for each is that there's more than just a market imperative in introducing a literary text beyond its place or origin: the choice to do so advances an argument about what the place/nation of origin is doing and why this is worthwhile for a different place/nation to consider. Pound and Eliot use *Ulysses* to put paid Victorian ideals and replace them with a modernist sensibility, just as Joyce settles old scores and claims for himself a place in the canon. Zooming out, the "particular purposes" of the coterie assembled in *MEWL* seem less about the challenges from Moscow or the market than a case for their special status as offering epic accountings of their moment.

In *The Modern Epic*, Moretti views literature as a socializing force that naturalizes cultural norms, class hierarchies, the individual as the meaningful social unit, and the economic systems underlying the rise of the bourgeoisie. Moretti's

⁷ O'Toole, Fintan. *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities*. (London: Verso, 1997), 33.

⁸ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 2003, 5.

⁹ Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 191.

modernism takes a broader lens than the London–New York dialectic, as well as a longer temporal frame: his modernism is of *longue duree* and originates with Goethe's *Faust*, a tale of development on which he bases his argument that history is a metaphor for geography, an analysis that explains the disappearance of the Joseph Conrad epigraph from *The Waste Land* as part of a larger modernist rhetoric of innocence. Cleary persuasively argues that this excision, and its replacement with a Latin line with Greek within it, not only removes a gesture to empire but “quietly underscores the thinness of twentieth-century cultural levels generally, which is another kind of modern savagery”.¹⁰ Both readings of Western literary development agree on an overarching and counterintuitive reduction of polyphony in modernism, from which Moretti exempts Joyce, in part by arguing that “*The Waste Land* is not a shorter *Ulysses*; it is a monologic *Ulysses*”.¹¹ Cleary prefers to call *The Waste Land* a pocket epic or epyllion, in this tying it to another staple of the American syllabus, *The Great Gatsby*.¹² This evaluation seems both more generous than Moretti's and somehow diminishing of each text, raising the question of what role Cleary sees for the mini-epic? How is it functionally different from the larger epics that he might have considered? To what extent are these mini-epics expressions of modernist autonomy, and how much are they mere sketches of a larger modernist vision? Is the victory of a mini-epic like *Gatsby* a sign of the triumph of mass culture over a more rarified strain? One of Cleary's contributions to our understanding of modernism is that for all its proclamations of distaste for capitalism, it is less outside of capitalism than Adorno would see it. As the relative brevity of *The Waste Land* has not afforded it the same cultural circulation, is this the key feature?

Or perhaps scope is key. Moretti proposes that “Large dimensions are probably favorable to formal innovation”,¹³ a cautious enough formulation that it does not preclude successful experiments in shorter texts. That said, unlike *Finnegans Wake*, which has a relative consistency of form, *Ulysses* is a laboratory of consecutive tests, some successful (Moretti offers “Aeolus” and “Wandering Rocks” as cases in point) and others not (he cites “Scylla and Charybdis” and especially “Sirens,” measuring their failure by the absence of efforts at replicating their styles). How would consideration of a book like the *Wake*, or, even better, Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, offer a counterperspective? Stein's massive epic perspective—her narrator announces at one stage, “I am filled up now so much with learning so much about men and women and feel so much wisdom in me now inside me completely organising that I am coming again to be almost certain that I can sometime be writing the complete history of every one who ever was or is or will be living”.¹⁴ Such an ambition shares a sense of

¹⁰ Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 140.

¹¹ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996), 227.

¹² Cleary's attention in the American context to the role of educational institutions in constituting modernism had me thinking about Irish modernism's consecration—Joyce's books, unlike Fitzgerald's, did not gain their stature from the acclaim of domestic reviewers and academics.

¹³ Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, 1996, 189.

¹⁴ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 665.

scope with classic epics, rejecting a modern centrality of the individual: how does it sit alongside *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*?

The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) would, like Moretti, argue that modernism is the constitutive aesthetic of world literature; it aligns with Apter in contending that the “pre-eminent contemporary formulation pushes intrinsically in the direction of commerce and commonality... [and] thereby distances itself... from the antecedent lexicon of ‘post’ theory which had been disposed to emphasize not comparison but incommensurability, not commonality but difference, not system but untotizable fragment, not the potential of translation but rather its relative impossibility, and not antagonism but agonism”.¹⁵ This latter position maps neatly onto much of what Cleary would argue—namely, particularly in the *Waste Land* reading and the argument about agonism in Joyce, the endorsement of literary rivalry. WReC’s attention to the Marxist analysis of combined and uneven development, particularly their point that “capitalist forms and relations exist alongside ‘archaic forms of economic life’ and pre-existing social and class relations”,¹⁶ leads me to ask the extent to which we see those archaic forms and the unevenness even within either the United Kingdom itself or the nations staging literary revolts against it. The chapter of *Ulysses* that Cleary uses as the scaffolding for his argument about Joyce, “Scylla”, takes place on a workday, but the characters we spend time with are not working in the sense we might imagine—we see few people in full-time employment. Stephen is something of an adjunct at Mr. Deasy’s school, his father out of work, his sisters taking in laundry to make ends meet. What attention do social forces from below merit, particularly in a book written at a moment whose growing distance between rich and poor signals a return to the sort of inequality seen before the (itself problematic) era of postwar consensus?

In one of the most elegant readings in the volume, Cleary discerns a complex and interwoven temporality that breaks the barrier between narrative and biography and shows literature’s remarkable capacity to create insight via juxtapositions: setting the stage for his analysis of Stephen’s Shakespeare lecture, he tells us that “this episode...compresses a whole compendium of earlier strong Irish misreadings of Shakespeare into Stephen’s performance and it also transacts Joyce’s ongoing rivalry with his own Irish contemporaries, all articulated in a doubled time from that pits the 1904 Dublin of the novel’s setting against the 1922 Paris of *Ulysses*’s eventual triumphant publication ... perform [ing] a contest between Joycean and Shakespearian personae... against the backdrop of three wars: the Second Boer War (1899–1902), a conflict still fresh to recent memory in the recreated Dublin of 1904; and World War I and the Irish War of Independence, events of equally recent memory at the time when *Ulysses* was published”.¹⁷ The overlay of historical moments of both literary and geopolitical significance is itself overlaid upon a literary rap battle in which Stephen

¹⁵ Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015), 6.

¹⁶ Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 2015, 11.

¹⁷ Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, 2021, 160.

is and is not a stand-in for Joyce and Hamlet (or his father) is and is not a stand-in for Shakespeare, all of which is further decoupled atop Homer's Odysseus as appropriated by imperial Rome.

Given this dense and rewarding interpretation, I was eager to see a similar palimpsest in the considerations of Fitzgerald and O'Neill, particularly the latter. Mary Burke's *Race, Politics, and Irish American* also contains a chapter considering the output of the two through a framework of them as Irish Americans. In her discussion, the racial politics with which Cleary begins his chapter are inextricable from an understanding of their works as well as their canonical status. During years working at sea, O'Neill "followed routes that had been charted by the mercantile and slave-trading interest that had shaped the Atlantic world. This interlude became the experiential bedrock of his earliest artistic negotiations of that past",¹⁸ a reading of O'Neill that frames him quite differently than Cleary's analysis through the bookshelves of classics and the citation one-upmanship marking *Long Days' Journey Into Night*. Burke's analysis relies on spatio-temporal overlays as well, noting that O'Neill drew inspiration from the Irish Revival and produced, during World War I, plays reflecting on the Middle Passage. Burke discusses plays from O'Neill's corpus with Black protagonists, interracial couples, and working-class characters. She notes that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* featured Paul Robeson in a role that launched his career—a career that, of course, was shaped by the rivalry that Moscow mounted as a cultural center, as well as by time spent living in Hempstead. Robeson's work seems something of ideal site for testing Cleary's ideas. Burke's chapter engages far more fully with the racial dynamics than class and it would be illuminating to see how Cleary might read their capitalist allegories. But in the end, this might be an insight along the lines of those "more a comment than a question" interventions that so often can be reduced to "why didn't you do this project like I would?"

And so I find it fitting to end with questions that I imagine early Joe Cleary might ask now Joe Cleary. Inspired by the lovely and analytically productive attention to temporal layering throughout *MEWL*, I can see layers of Cleary's own work evident in this book. Across his oeuvre, Cleary's ongoing concerns and methods include an interest in the ideological implications of genre, a comparatist impulse with a geopolitical girding, and a conviction that cultural evolution is shaped by and maintains economic and socioeconomic forms, informed by a dialectical approach. Interest in the relationships of peripheral areas to imperial centers dates back to his first book, *Literature, Partition, and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*.¹⁹ As in *MEWL*, the 2002 book compares responses of British imperial outposts to conditions manufactured by centuries of British geopolitical and economic interference, noting the canny way that economic privation can be masked by presumptions of illiberal ethnonationalisms.²⁰ Seeing Britain's world dominance through the lens of Arrighi's systemic

¹⁸ Mary Burke, *Race, Politics, and Irish America: A Gothic History* (Oxford: Oxford, 2022), 69.

¹⁹ Joseph N. Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁰ This essay was composed in the summer of 2023, prior to the current assault on Gaza by Israel. I am aware with heightened intensity of the importance of Cleary's insights about Palestine.

cycles of accumulation, *MEWL* extends that frame to the baton-passing to the United States, with the anchor leg now being run by China, as explored in *The Irish Expatriate Novel in Late Capitalist Globalization* (also 2021, underscoring Cleary's range and productivity). The current volume revisits as well central concerns in *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (2007)²¹ as to why some nations produce particular genres or key works, as in his exploration of the limits of Ian Watt's theory of realism and master narratives in a national context with markedly different social and linguistic conditions than Britain's, a question that animated the consideration of the dialectic between realist and modernist forms. *Outrageous Fortune* usefully weaves together economic and formal analysis to argue that a conservative naturalism has been less generative of progress beyond mid-century Irish insularity, looking back to the modernist texts again considered here. Would the author of *Outrageous Fortune* see the current volume as doing groundwork for its own argument, providing modernist readings that slot into its own schema? Does it do advance work for *Literature, Partition, and the Nation State*? How does this book's argument about the projection of the worst features of tradition and modernity onto one's rivals map onto the argument that modernism is a shift of supremacy from London to New York? And was there a subtitle that the publisher rejected?

Author biography. Mary M. McGlynn is professor of English at Baruch College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. The author of *Broken Irelands: Literary Form in Post-Crash Irish Fiction* (Syracuse UP, 2022), she focuses on literature, culture, and class in Britain and Ireland from modernism to the present.

²¹ Joseph N. Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007).

Cite this article: McGlynn, Mary. 2024. "More of a Question than a Comment: A Response to Modernism, Empire, World Literature, by Joe Cleary." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 11, 317–324. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2024.21>