

## BOOK FORUM

# Forum on Joe Cleary's *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature*

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For decades, postcolonial studies has defined itself in the agon between political drives and institutional accommodations. It is a recurring challenge to pin academic work to the anticolonial struggle. From the start, and up to the moment, postcolonial scholars have wanted to reconcile subtle inquiry into the history of culture/discourse with hard-edged programs of materialist thought and activist struggle. They have wanted to define “anticolonialism as theory.”<sup>1</sup> Within North Atlantic university settings, postcolonial studies often has to reassert its founding principles and commitments lest it find itself assimilated into a bland institutional imperative to “study the whole world” or muster well-meaning attention for the Global South. Meantime, postcolonial methods rooted in the humanities have been challenged by cross-over ideas from world-systems theory. Those ideas have done much to illuminate the longue durée of literary history, but macrohistorical and macrosociological research can also display a “fatal disrespect of culture” (Palumbo-Liu, Robbins, and Tanoukhi, 5).<sup>2</sup> Matthew Eatough wisely wonders how scholars can “locate the literary text itself” within the Big History narratives of global capitalism derived from the work of, for example, Giovanni Arrighi or Immanuel Wallerstein (609–610).<sup>3</sup> Many trained in the Orientalism tradition of colonial discourse studies view world-systemic thinking as likely to under-represent cultural differences.

At times it seems as if the core debates about postcolonial inquiry have been displaced and muffled by two rather inert terms—World Literature and the

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<sup>1</sup> Yogita Goyal, “Anticolonialism as Theory,” *Representations* 162 (2023): 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, et al., eds., *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Duke UP, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Eatough, “The Literary History of World-Systems, II: World Literature and Deep Time,” *Literature Compass*, 12, no. 11 (2015): 603–14.

Global Anglophone. These terms can leave students stranded in a theoretical vacuum between postcolonial cultural studies and world-systemic models. They are at base curricular conveniences, categories meant to stake out a big tent for nonwestern and nonwhite writers within literature departments. But the concept of World Literature and the fortunes of global English also have a determinate history. It is a history rooted in the aesthetic power of modernism and the political power of nineteenth-century empires. Joe Cleary's new book gives that history back to the field of postcolonial inquiry in an eminently provocative, eminently usable form.

*Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* bridges Anglo modernisms—the literature of imperial crack-up, and postcolonial writing—the literature of decolonization. Cleary takes cultural self-assertion on the world stage as one crucial part of the remaking of the world after the empire. He uses Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* as his launchpad but pushes beyond Casanovan aesthetics into deft, deep accounts of geopolitical conditions. *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* does not just pick its way among the conceptual sinkholes that threaten to open up in the terrain of “political formalism.” It breathes new and confident life into political formalism. No one who has read Cleary's *Outrageous Fortune* will be surprised by this; no one who is interested in the literary history of the postcolonial world will want to miss this fresh view of the twentieth century.

The book develops a remarkably consistent and illuminating method for reading the long arc of literary power from its concentration in European canons to its diffusion into a prismatic array of modernist projects dotting the satellite cultures of the Anglo-world. These genealogies and geographies make sense of world literature as an object of materialist inquiry. They also illustrate how refined matters of literary form map onto shifts in the world-system. Literary history like this gives us access to an English transformed by the process of its decentering and dismantling. The book puts old-school modernism with all of its glittering aesthetic legacies into a story of resistance to, rather than mere subsistence within, the global cultural system dominated (still) by English. For Cleary, world literature is writing about a whole, unevenly developed global system; it is not writing that just happens to come from outside Euro-America.

*Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* thus vindicates the study of literature itself within the ambit of decolonization and imperial decline. It does so not by fetishizing literary value as against other forms of expression—not by excluding other archives of social history, media analysis, or area studies, but by reminding its readers how deeply interconnected the problem of contemporary postcolonial expression is to the struggle of earlier artistic generations vying, vowing not to be conscripted “to the glory of resented empires” (Cleary, 275).

In this book, Irish and American modernisms surge up against the European literary establishments of Britain (and France); then they surge up against themselves. The great efflorescence of Irish postcolonial studies in the 1990s, of which Cleary's own work was a key part, has given us valuable insights about Irish modernists in relation to other anticolonial writers across the world. But few students raised in the post-Cold War epoch of American ascendancy are likely to understand just how recently America was itself a provincial postcolony, was itself vastly colonial yet still prehegemonic. There are so many reasons to

return now, via Cleary, to the scene of American modernism, and to grasp it as the attempt to bring American hard and soft power to the world in tandem. One such reason is that our own decade, the 2020s, will likely mark the emergence of a new global hegemon in Asia, or at least hasten the twilight of America's "sole superpower" status. Cleary's book arrives at the true end of the American century (from roughly 1920 to 2020, America will have been the largest economy in the world; before that, Britain; after 2030, perhaps, China). It thus encompasses the whole arc of American cultural self-projection—the arc that was, in a sense, the unifying subtext of Edward Said's original project from *Orientalism* (1978) to *Culture and Imperialism* (1994).

Looking backward and straight through the heavy filter of US power in the world today, it becomes easier to see American culture circa 1920 managing its contradictory position as both upstart and behemoth, underdog and top-dog. Having opened that line of inquiry, Cleary can provide a crystalline examination of provincial modernist explosions in Ireland and America as related but distinct events. "How," he asks, "could two societies of this kind, one a byword for nonmodern backwardness and instability, the other a byword for a kind of hyper-modern futurity that lacked all historical sense, to begin with, create a literature that would be both famously vanguardist and innovative in a formal sense and yet simultaneously lay claim to precisely those qualities of deep tradition, classicism, cosmopolitanism and intellectual elitism commonly associated with aristocratic culture?" The question evokes the old Protestant ascendancies of both Ireland and America, rocking in certain narrow cradles of modernist lament, but it also captures the besetting paradoxes of a modernism that is, after all, postcolonial through and through. Its key players were often deeply split; they were insurgent mandarins, classicist rebels, anti-modern innovators, and metropolitan provincials. Their experiments in verbal art became part of a North Atlantic literary system in the interwar period, and they went on to serve as models and irritants within the wide world of the global Anglophone, inspiring and antagonizing many postcolonial writers who wanted to track—then crack—the grain of metropolitan modernism.

Cleary's tandem reading of Irish and American self-assertion through literary and linguistic revolutions brings Hugh Kenner's modernism of "three provinces" (United Kingdom, United States, and Ireland) into a new kind of historical focus. Brilliant readings of Pound and Yeats expose their parallel condescension toward home societies they wished to celebrate and eviscerate. Cleary's review of "Pound's pugnacity and Yeats's hauteur," his paired analysis of Yeats's "Celtic Element" and Pound's "Patria Mia" are both inspired. Where Pound had to slow down the American dynamo to inject it with high cultural values, Yeats had to breathe life into Irish modernity. Both felt an imperative to intervene in the timeline of the bourgeois revolution, here hindering its bolting progress, there hastening it past its appointed hour. Cleary offers a characteristically sound and crisp synthesis on that point: "The challenges that confronted the Irish and the Americans were not exactly the same: for the Americans the preeminent task was to overcome not only their literary dependence on England but also the supposed debilities of democratic culture more generally; for the Irish to rescue themselves for the social and political backwardness and disorder apparently

innate to the Celt while simultaneously redeeming Saxon England of its grossness. It was from such combustible materials that Irish and American modernisms struck their peripheral fires.”

Yes. And after reading the whole book, I was surprised to reflect on the fact that despite having read, admired, and taught major studies of Irish revivalism by Seamus Deane, Emer Nolan, Declan Kiberd, David Lloyd, Enda Duffy, and others, it had never occurred to me to compare these works to the model of literary nativism that Walter Benn Michaels set out in *Our America*. But of course, the problem of American modernism and its encounter with multiracial, multiethnic democracy in the United States shoots through the work of Henry James and T. S. Eliot, of Willa Cather and William Faulkner, not to mention Pound and Fitzgerald.

The most powerful demonstration of this book’s lucidity comes in the chapter on James and Eliot. Here we see why the macro model of Arrighian power brings together literary form and economic history so instructively. James and Eliot were the ones who commandeered the English novel and the English poem between 1880 and 1920 as an expatriate Anglophone modernism (driven by colonial insurgents including Jean Rhys, Katherine Mansfield, H. D., and Gertrude Stein) stormed the London scene. James and Eliot rebuilt the concept of a leading civilizational power, America, which was also a radically unintegrated civilizational center. It was to them devoid of a true capital, devoid of an aristocratic value-set to anchor new classicisms, and devoid of a properly, thickly settled tradition. The “peripheral fires” of American modernism kindled a literary mode of self-consuming authority and produced world-beating works that were also studies in hesitation, indirection, labored syntax, negative capability, lapidary evanescence, vivid obscurity, frozen affect, fragmented form, and epic unsettlement.

These may be familiar facets of the James-Eliot aesthetic, the signature moves of this two-man London takeover squad. But what has never been so clear until Cleary is how all that formal gear-grinding maps onto the tectonic plate-grinding of a world-system caught between European and American hegemony. These modernist forms speak to, speak from within the interregnum between cycles of accumulation. Cleary convincingly reads *The Golden Bowl* and *The Waste Land* as oblique depictions of that epochal shift. It is a surprising bonus feature of *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* that Cleary excavates a convincing soft-power argument from within Arrighi’s *Long Twentieth Century*. Arrighi emphasizes the fact that rising superpowers need to ratify their industrial and economic dominance with “leadership” and “authority.” Their goal? To stabilize a new interstate system of trade and treaties after a period of murkiness and chaos.<sup>4</sup> Cleary extrapolates from this point, via the Casanovan prestige matrix, to suggest that a rising hegemon (the United States) wants to project its soft power through a sophisticated program of arts and letters. Enter Cleary’s ingenious reading of *The Golden Bowl* as “above all committed to the idea that what is

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times*, (1994) (London: Verso, 2010).

nowadays called 'hard power' is always best kept subordinate, where possible, to 'soft power,' that domination is never more firmly secured than when leavened into a hegemony" (126). The soft-power program of American modernism, if we can call it that, was thus to make American experiences, values, and interests stand in (with blind innocence) for the experiences, values, and interests of the whole world. Such a modernism, backed by economic and strategic dominance, became the intellectual infrastructure of a new universalism with an American base.

So far so good. But the soft power of the new American superpower—its "formidable restructuring resolve, a can-do capacity"—had a fundamental problem (Cleary 107). It was predicated on the vaulting literary ambitions of socially critical modernists, so it could not possibly or not simply circulate an "affirmative national narrative" about the United States. James and Eliot and their ilk achieved what the moment demanded: new forms to take the measure of an American dynamo, but new forms that also recoiled from the motley unpredictability of multiracial democracy, from the entropic force of American geography, from the vulgar excess of mass media, from the belatedness of America's bid for global prestige, cast into the world just as high art was dying in the vineyard.

For Cleary, and rightly so, the form problems of US modernism are post-colonial historical contradictions that cannot be overcome by aesthetic proxy. Such form problems define and limit the works under examination in the book. They put *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature*, to my mind, in the company of some of the most subtle work on modernist legacies in the postcolonial world, such as *Semicolonial Joyce*, edited by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes, or *A Transnational Poetics* by Jahan Ramazani.

The best gift that Cleary's new book gives to literary scholars comes from its account of epic failure. From James and Eliot to Joyce, and then forward to Fitzgerald, O'Neill, and Walcott, we find intricate forms that upend the universalisms they have mounted, though not totally; forms that dilapidate their beauty, though not totally; forms that capture the immanent impossibility of taking over the literary center while discrediting the notion of a literary center. Mock epics, minor epics, and failed epics are the signature genres of this study. Under their sign, Cleary co-ordinates new readings of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Walcott's *Omeros*. The tonal bleakness and wastrel aesthetics of *Omeros* push it outside any kind of triumphal Odyssean homecoming or Adamic self-assertion. Read together and across the span of 75 decolonizing years, Joyce and Walcott testify jointly to the importance of literature's survival. For these weary bards, the epic tradition survives as a vital sense-making apparatus pitched at world scale but scalded by modernist irony and leveled by pungent intimacies of image and percept.

The mock-epic genealogy could easily be extended further into postcolonial studies at large and in a more contemporary frame, to the works of Bernardine Evaristo, Vikram Seth, or Salman Rushdie, or, indeed, to the novel trilogies and tetralogies of Wilson Harris, Nuruddin Farah, Pramodya Ananta Toer, and Assia Djebar—all surveyed convincingly by Peter Hitchcock in *The Long*

*Space*.<sup>5</sup> The mock-epic thread developed by Cleary also radiates out from classic high modernism (Joyce and Eliot) sideways into some surprising historical pockets, taking in the Irish-Americans F. Scott Fitzgerald and Eugene O'Neill. Here an ethnic lit paradigm meets Irish studies meets a modernist sensibility meets both postcolonial and world-systemic approaches. Failure defines the aesthetic horizons of Fitzgerald and O'Neill in their baffled attempts to find an epic seam in the fabric of American fiction and drama during the 1920s. Cleary writes that their "modernist masterworks...disclose in their forms, morbidly and magnificently maybe, the distress of their lateness" (241).

Both Fitzgerald and O'Neill were keenly aware of the rapidly shifting attention of American audiences to mass media and away from modernist writing. "Paradoxically," Cleary observes, "the United States might finally have constructed for itself in the early to mid-twentieth century the infrastructures and institutional complexes necessary to support its own American high culture, but it had simultaneously become identified with a Hollywoodization of culture that threatened to overwhelm real artistic achievement not only at home but across the world" (202). Cleary is no doubt right about the pyrrhic victory of American modernism, born just in time to witness the growing industrialization of art, ideas, and images in the age of mechanical reproduction.

But modernist masterworks and Hollywood studio films were not just antithetical to each other. They were also two reinforcing aspects of the same system—the high and vernacular registers of metropolitan perception in the United States. Raymond Williams coined the phrase "metropolitan perception" to describe the elite, urban, mostly European assimilation of world cultural traffic into the genres and institutions of the metropolis.<sup>6</sup> Hollywood's kaleidoscopic depiction of the world after 1920 in a strong sense mirrored modernism's ability to assimilate global raw materials, much as Williams defined it, that is as "...the magnetic concentration of wealth and power in imperial capitals and the simultaneous cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate cultures." America's vernacular globalism continued to gain power after the 1920s and lasted well into the post-WWII era when many "subordinate cultures" in the Global South were challenging the representational power of the metropolitan West.

The old elite centers of London print and Parisian art were displaced not just by the magnetic power of postwar New York, but by the media brawn of Los Angeles. I am invoking here Miriam Hansen's reading of movies as vernacular modernism and Lee Grieveson's reading of movies as the marketing wing of American hegemony. "Movies," Grieveson suggests, "began to operate as the avant-garde for the spread of US commodity culture and capital across the world system" (6).<sup>7</sup> Modernists like Fitzgerald and O'Neill found themselves averse to serving what Cleary calls an "affirmative national narrative" for the American Century, but Hollywood producers were not so constrained. American soft power

<sup>5</sup> Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford: Stanford, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2018).

in a way bundled together the negations of modernism and the affirmations of Hollywood. To insist on this point of emphasis is to observe that our modes of cultural analysis are themselves subject to historical change. If we are now able to take a longer view of “culture and imperialism” than did Said, if we are now using Arrighian terms such as “soft power and hegemony” instead, it is in part because we have a historical vantage point that makes the values clash between modernism and Hollywood recede a bit. What once seemed baldly antithetical—what once seemed like an ideological chasm between the high and middle brows of American culture, comes in the longer run of history to overlap or to share space within the world republic of media systems.

In other words, as we gain distance in the twentieth century, we can see more and more the parallel between the force of British high culture and the force of American mass culture in the formation of both colonial and anticolonial discourse. One deep vein of postcolonial literary inquiry has been dedicated to charting the messy process by which so many Global South writers absorbed, used, and then strongly revised the British literary canon that had been delivered by colonial education in English letters. We have fewer authoritative and synthetic histories of the revolt against US mass-cultural imperialism though that story has, in a sense, diffused itself across many academic disciplines and area studies. And of course, the revolt against the US culture industry had already sprung from within American modernism itself. It is easy to imagine extending the lines of Cleary's analysis one step further into an arc of modernist artwork that runs from Gertrude Stein to Andy Warhol: attuned to the ambiguous appeal of celebrity star power, built on the repetition and homogenization of industrial process, driven by queer and feminist reappropriations of the consumerist mainstream. In fact, Stein's massive mock epics seem like obvious candidates for reconsideration under the aegis of Cleary's core thesis. If I were a Stein scholar, I would see the arrival of *Modernism, Empire, and World Literature* as a chance to break significant new ground at the place where *The Making of Americans* and *The Geographical History of America* meet postcolonial and world-systems analysis. The best testament to the force of Cleary's case is that it demands further research: the gendered and sexual dimensions of the unmaking of empires and the remaking of cultural prestige are worthy topics for consideration going forward from here.

There are indeed many paths broken open by this book. The questions that lie ahead for postcolonial inquiry are superbly illuminated by the questions that lie behind today's world-system as renarrated by Cleary. After the project of provincializing Europe, after the provincializing of America in its autumn, what comes next?<sup>8</sup> We have seen the long rise of English as a lingua franca through the age of print media and high culture in the late nineteenth century. We have seen

<sup>8</sup> The overlapping in real time of American and Asian cycles of accumulation seems to demand a transfer of critical energy from anti-imperialism to anti-capitalism, as Colleen Lye has recently suggested. Lye's point holds for postcolonial inquiry, though she framed it in relation to Asian American Studies: “Rejecting...neoliberalism east and west of the Pacific entails...an explicitly anticapitalist intellectual project, not just an anti-imperialist one” (239). Colleen Lye, “Asian American Cultural Critique at the End of US Empire.” *American Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2022): 237–55.



it through the age of broadcast media and mass culture in the long twentieth. Will the latest turns of digital media and generative AI extend or disrupt the leasehold of global English? It seems at least possible that internet life has made English more indispensable rather than less, just at the time when novels, poems, films, and TV shows from the Anglophone world look more and more like provincial and residual forms of soft power.

Consider, too, the breaking frame of the old US-backed “liberal world order” in the global present. Will the neo-imperialisms of Russia, China, America, Turkey, et al. return the world to a new stage of Great Power rivalry, ushering in an unstable interregnum at the end of the US-led cycle of accumulation? In that context, Cleary’s brand of literary history illuminates the fate of liberalism itself: “The grandee modernisms of the Irish and American peripheries are in this sense a belated outgrowth of nineteenth-century classical liberalism’s quarrels with itself, quarrels that would become more rather than less intense with the passage of time.” Both radicals and reactionaries are closing in on the fatal contradictions of liberalism. The quarrels that Cleary identifies above, quarrels that were never resolved in form or discourse under US neoliberal hegemony, are now loose in the wild as the besetting contradictions of our time.

**Competing interest.** The author declares none.

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