

BOOK FORUM

Response to the Responses to *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*

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It is a pleasure to acknowledge the responses by Sarah Brouillette, Jed Esty, Mary McGlynn, and Michael Malouf to my work. I have learned much from all of these critics over my career, and their reviews here are generous, probing, cogent, and complex. If individuals require meaningful social relations with others to enjoy something like a complete life, and books need thoughtful readers to do so, then *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* is already a fortunate book.

Since the response articles raise diverse issues but also some common matters converging on the structure and selection of authors in *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, it may be as well to begin by reiterating my own sense of the book's priorities before turning to specific questions in the individual pieces. As I see it, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* advances one central thesis while also attempting to address several related but distinct scholarly agendas. The central argument is that the modern (capitalist) world literary system is indeed a structured system comprised of metropolitan centers and capitals, semiperipheries, and peripheries, but that that system is also capable of historical change or transformation, and that the efflorescence of modernist literature in the early twentieth century contributed to one such significant process of change. This change coincided with a period of immense economic turbulence, world war, imperial collapse or realignment, and the increasing international reach and prestige of English at the expense of French as a world language. In the Anglophone world, American and Irish modernisms, each internally differentiated, reaped an unprecedented level of international recognition for their respective national literatures and in so doing lent momentum to a wider process by which New York gradually displaced London as the Anglophone literary world's leading center.

An admirer of Pascale Casanova's pioneering work on world literature, I nonetheless sought to revise *The World Republic of Letters* in a number of ways.

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I tried to conceive of the literary world system in more historically nuanced and flexible terms than I felt Casanova did and I simultaneously wanted to afford more attention to capitalism, political economy, and geopolitics than she did: hence my debts to Giovanni Arrighi. Furthermore, I wanted to allow for competing literary world systems (especially the Soviet one under construction after 1917), to rethink the role of what Casanova terms “the assimilated writer,” and, not least, to show that the tensions intrinsic to the force field of the world literary system stamp themselves on the forms of individual literary works. As such, to assess a literary text in terms of world literary systems requires immanent critique at the level of form and content as well as attention to matters such as book markets, circulation, translation, critical receptions, and consecrations.

However, although *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*'s interests extend beyond Ireland to engage with American and Caribbean writing as well as to deal with matters of modernism and world literature more generally, it did not cease to be committed to Irish studies. Yeats and Joyce are obviously crucial to any account of Anglophone modernism, but when I added to these a chapter on F. Scott Fitzgerald and Eugene O'Neill, I did so, knowingly, because I wanted the book to also contribute to the still slender body of critical work connecting Irish and Irish-American modernisms. Some chapters of *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (2014), which I edited, had already engaged that task. Moreover, the major critical studies of American expatriate modernism in Europe, whether dwelling on white or Black writers, have always tended to look bilaterally to Paris and London, overlooking Dublin. By reflecting on the concurrent moments and interconnections of Irish and American modernisms, domestic and expatriate, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* also attempted, in its own small way, to indicate that the New York–Harlem–Dublin axes of literary change and resistance to literary London's long hegemony might reward greater attention. Scholarship is by nature time-intensive and academic books typically come with strict word limits, so I was aware that a chapter on Fitzgerald and O'Neill might have to come at the expense of studies on Stein or McKay—each obvious figures for inclusion—or others.

Mary McGlynn's insightful essay asks how *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* relates to my earlier books. My answer is that what it shares most obviously with them is its attempt to situate modern Irish literature in the wider context of a capitalist and imperialist world while attempting to consider Irish literature as something more than a symptom of that world. Literature cannot escape such symptomatic reflection, but it is nevertheless a product, too, of complex intellectual, ideological, and cultural crosscurrents, all with their own weight, texture, and relative autonomy. As such, Chapter One of *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* attempts to rework Casanova via Arrighi, and Chapter Two engages with some of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critical and intellectual discourses and aesthetic ideologies—identified here with Tocqueville, Arnold, Yeats, and Pound—that conditioned Irish and American literary nationalisms and cultural production and which the latter to some degree revised and inverted, turning the literary tables so to speak. To achieve some sense of a mobile system that was not abstractly economic, and some sense of literary

production that did not collapse the economic, political, or intellectual forces involved too seamlessly into each other, this long lead-in seemed necessary, and the close readings of literary works are confined therefore to Chapters Three to Six. I share McGlynn's regret for the lack of a chapter on Stein, especially given Stein's contribution to epic modernism. I can also regret one on Paul Robeson, though the latter's contributions would take us into the fields of song, acting, and activism—these somewhat beyond my study's more literary focus. I have fewer regrets about the “missing” studies of Mansfield, Rhys, Tagore, Wyndham Lewis, and others mentioned in various essays. These are all legitimately fascinating figures, but my central ambition was to revise Casanova and to offer a stencil sketch of a crucial shift in the core structure of the Anglophone world literary system and New York's displacement of London as the Anglophone literary capital of capitals. In the period stretching from the mid- or late-1800s to the end of World War II, Dublin and Irish literature in English appears to me to play a role quite different from those of any literary city or national literature (in English) emerging in New Zealand, Australia, India, Canada, and so on. Today, Indian or Caribbean literatures in English are certainly more consequential for Anglophone world literature than contemporary Irish literature is. However, literary historical temporalities matter and this was not always thus.

Jed Esty's characteristically generous and conceptually lucid article offers a précis of *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* with more panache than I can replicate. He rightly observes, as does Mary McGlynn, that “mock epics, minor epics, and failed epics are the signature genres” of the study. We concur that Irish and American modernisms in this period are “postcolonial through and through”: I might prefer the term “anticolonial” and add that these modernisms nevertheless retain some colonial elements just as US and Irish cultural nationalisms did. We agree, too, on “the pyrrhic victory” of American modernism, created in part to supply the United States with an ambitious literary high culture, that arrived just in time to meet, thanks to ongoing technological and communications revolutions, a globalizing US mass culture. I can understand why many might resist the idea that American culture could be “colonial” in an era when the United States was already flexing its great-power ambitions and had just closed its own internal colonial settler frontier on its west coast. However, one has only to read later nineteenth- or early twentieth-century American literary criticism and political writings on the United States' place in the world to see how often Americans still thought of themselves as culturally colonized by and indebted to Europe. These writings offer some sense of how much it mattered to American *amour propre* that this situation should be remedied.

Where Esty takes issue with *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* is that where I see an unreconciled antagonism between American literary modernism and American mass culture, he, taking a lead from Miriam Hansen, sees cooperation. “The old elite centers of London print and Paris art were displaced,” Esty writes, “not just by the magnetic power of post-war New York but by the media brawn of Los Angeles.” I do not at all dispute this: Jordan Brower's *Classical Hollywood, American Modernism: A Literary History of the Studio System* (2024) adds to a growing

body of work that supports this sense of things. While American modernists like Fitzgerald, O'Neill, Eliot, Stein, Pound, Dos Passos, and many other figures, including the Harlem Renaissance writers, might refuse to offer an affirmative national American literature, "Hollywood producers," Esty adds, "were not so constrained. American soft power in a way bundled together the negations of modernism and the affirmations of Hollywood." True. Or, at least true if one acknowledges also that this bundling was never without difficulties and that persistent anxieties about the character of American greatness, literary or societal, remained tenacious, often lurking just beneath the surface of American sheen.

There are few books in postcolonial studies that I hold in higher regard than *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007) and fewer still as formative for *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*. With Sarah Brouillette I share, I would like to think, a circumspect disposition with regard to some of the more inflated claims made for literary writers and works, even those we most admire. Even so, I tend to see high literary achievements as of positive value in themselves even when I cannot admire the writer's politics or the work's conservative purpose. Literature of exceptional stylistic, intellectual, formal, or linguistic complexity offers something beyond its instrumental uses. Just as swimming the English Channel, breaking a world sprinting or marathon record, or becoming the first woman to fly around the world do little directly to improve the human lot, such acts appear still to affirm species possibility by stretching capacities and horizons. We should allow at least as much for exceptional literary feats, which are also intellectual feats.

Here, Brouillette offers a brilliant miniature case study of Jamaica Kincaid, a writer whose work I teach annually, to complement or counter my account of Walcott's *Omeros*. Brouillette prefers Kincaid's "bilious" use of an unloved metropolitan English language and literary inheritance to Walcott's admittedly rather tiresome wrestling with his conscience (a trait he shared with his contemporary Seamus Heaney) about his complicities in colonial and world literary systems. Brouillette documents how little reverence Kincaid affords English or its literary icons even as her work, thanks in part to the rise of feminist and postcolonial studies in American English departments, is elevated to a prestigious position in contemporary "postcolonial" or "world Anglophone" canons. I concur. However, I would add that Kincaid pays homage to Walcott—*Autobiography of My Mother*, for example, is dedicated to him—and owes some obvious debts to the Brontës. One might further add that we can find precedent for Kincaid's "bilious" English in Joyce's even more irreverent treatment of Shakespeare in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode of *Ulysses* and his parody of many English styles in "Oxen of the Sun." Joyce's Irish contemporary, critic John Eglinton, complained that in Joyce's hands, the "[English] language found itself constrained by its new master to perform tasks to which it was unaccustomed in the service of pure literature." "Like a devil taking pleasure in forcing a virgin to speak obscenely," he protested, "Joyce rejoiced darkly in causing the language of Milton and Wordsworth to utter all but unimaginable filth and treason."¹ Still,

¹ For Eglinton's appraisal of Joyce and *Ulysses*, see John Eglinton, "The Beginnings of Joyce," *Irish Literary Portraits* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1935), 131–50, 145–46.

despite their Calibanesque dispositions and manglings of English, Joyce and Kincaid both take English as their medium, and it is part of my larger argument that no amount of subversive treatment finally cancels the postcolonial contribution of the wider world of that English language and literature. In this historically conditioned win–lose game, Joyce and Kincaid know that in many ways they must inevitably lose by winning.

More substantially, Brouillette leans finally toward a Warwick Research Collective (WREC) model of world literature than the Casanovan one that *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* develops in a Marxian direction. Unlike Walcott, she argues, “Kincaid’s work isn’t very concerned about the complicities or complexities of her own—or any—career in writing” and is “focused instead on the very making of her own person by the historical unfolding of the coercive force of capitalism in its incorporating spread.” By the same token, Brouillette prefers a Neil Lazarus-style mode of conceptualizing literature “not in the sense of shifting national hegemonies but in the way that the globalizing conditions of capitalist modernity mean that many situations of literary production (including Walcott’s and Kincaid’s) become comparably linked to this totalizing force.” Here, I demur. We all agree that capitalism is now a global infrastructure and offers a planetary if radically uneven frame within which literary works anywhere may be compared. However, to bypass the nation-state and the competitive force fields of national literatures is to swim with the stream of contemporary capitalism, not against it.

Whatever its weaknesses, the Casanovan model is more materialist, not less, than the WREC model, the latter’s virtues allowed. This is because Casanova does not simply focus on the individual literary work assessed in terms of a combined and uneven global capitalism, but also takes account—or offers the conceptual means to do so—of many more variables than the WREC model does. For Casanova, the world literary system is a complex force field in which the relative prestige of some languages and literary traditions, the relative authority of some cultural institutions and their resources (academies, university systems, critics, prestigious literary journals, and prizes), and major centers acting as crucibles for both conservation and experiment, all matter. The WREC model leaps over all such factors, but a mode of critical interpretation that moves too fast from the level of the literary work to that of a totalized global capitalism is not sufficiently mediated or dialectical. And to this extent, at least Brouillette’s own later work, especially in *UNESCO and the Force of the Literary* (2019), is closer, because it attends to literature as an institution and not just as a textual corpus, in method to Casanova even if closer in spirit to WREC or to Lazarus’s *Into Our Labours* (2022).

Again, Kincaid, Brouillette observes, is less concerned than Walcott with national literary rivalries and more preoccupied with the incurable melancholy of her solitary self-creation in a world of relentless capitalist pressures. I agree. However, this is not because she is more radical than Walcott but because the forces of national political and literary resistances to global capitalism have waned considerably with the passage of a generation or two, commonly in ways generally bad for literature, good for capitalism. An impressively resourceful and tough-minded writer, Kincaid’s successful but defeated posture, stranded in

splendid isolation in verdant Vermont and imperial Harvard, is a sadly symptomatic instance of our alienated literary present.

Like several others, Michael Malouf asks “Why these writers and not others?” and where Brouillette offers Kincaid as a supplement or alternative to Walcott, Malouf offers Claude McKay. “What about other writers who moved into the London–Dublin–New York axis?” he inquires, citing Tagore, Coomaraswamy, Sarojini Naidu, Katherine Mansfield, and Lin Yutang as examples. Well, the answer has to be that *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*’s focus is on the complex multidimensional process by which one major Anglophone literary center, New York, displaced a much older literary capital, London, a change of such significance as to be a real rarity. As my study points out, many things that were nonliterary—world wars, imperial collapses, and geopolitical and financial changes—were crucial to that change. So too was the slow but steady accumulation of American cultural capital and its buildup of cultural institutions (art galleries, museums, opera houses, universities, publishing houses, and exhibition sites), especially from the Gilded Age onward. Individual writers and works are only part of this larger history. My ambition, therefore, was not to reflect on the diversity of the writers working between the London–New York axis. Paris still plays a huge role in this period, so it would be better to refer to the Paris–London–New York axis, but in any case, my analytical focus was on the ways in which writers and works were shaped by or helped to shape, consciously or inadvertently, this unusual transfer of capitals.

As for McKay, another writer I teach annually, I seriously considered including him for all the reasons Malouf so splendidly outlines. In fact, the Caribbean writer I most wanted to include was C. L. R. James, especially *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which, though not a modernist work, shares the epic ambitions of other major modernist texts in the period. Like T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) (written, obviously, from the other side of the racial–colonial divide), *The Black Jacobins* is a sweeping historical account of a revolutionary campaign written with the grandeur, verve, and vision of literary epic. It is also, though this may be more obvious in retrospect than at the time, one of the many Caribbean works in the 1930s announcing the emergence of a new “province” of English writing—an emergence that apparently escaped notice by Eliot, Pound, Joyce, or Stein. That Caribbean emergence received greater literary recognition a generation or two later in the figures of Lamming, Marson, Carpentier, Naipaul, Walcott, Conde, Brathwaite, and so many others.

However, if I eventually decided on Walcott rather than James or McKay, it was partly because I did not want to “aestheticize” *The Black Jacobins*, partly, too, because while McKay, as Malouf recognizes, was an immediate contemporary of the interwar modernists he was not wholly “canonized” into English (or American English) literature until after the upsurge of Caribbean national independence movements and the upheavals of American Civil Rights. And, finally, I opted for *Omeros*, which afforded me a chance to consider what happened to pre-WWII modernist-style epic ambition in a post-WWII period when the rise of American cultural hegemony was no longer in ascendance but already, in the “program era,” a consolidated fact. In this regard, the Walcott chapter shares interests with *The*

Irish Expatriate Novel in Late Capitalist Globalization (2021), which also takes “the program era” and literary globalization in a neoliberal world order as its focus.

Mary McGlynn, a valued comrade in Irish studies, raises a cluster of questions in her finely discerning essay about a method that, in her words, is “more concerned with distributions of capital than hierarchies of class” or with the complexities of racial and gender dynamics. It is true that Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century* sacrifices, as its author acknowledged, the role of labor in its study of the global dynamics of economic capital. Likewise, it is true that Casanova, informed by Braudel and Bourdieu, is not concerned with questions of class or gender in her accounts of cultural capital in *The World Republic of Letters*. If these are weaknesses, they are weaknesses widely shared in Western Marxist literary criticism from Lukács to the Frankfurt School to Jameson. There are complex reasons for this stemming mostly from the Marxian conviction that literature’s sociality is registered primarily at the level of form and not that of “message” or overt alignment. The Casanovan insistence on the world literary system as a self-reproducing force field in its own right compounds this stress. It does so by offering to study literature not only as a window onto or reflective refraction of the nonliterary domains (the lived unequal everyday world of race, gender, and class) but also as something regulated by its own field logic and inequalities.

From this perspective, to put things rather crudely, even great works that deal frontally with gender, let’s say George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871–72) or Ernaux’s *Une Femme* (1987), or with class, let’s say Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) or James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–35), also serve many other social functions. When they become part of a school or university syllabus, for example, they might help to open discussions on these topics but simultaneously ratify class stratifications via examination and certification filtering. When they become part of French, English, or American national canons, they might symbolically and marginally advance the role of women or the left but also reinforce great power and national prestige. When marketed by corporate publishers, usually managed by largely white university-educated male managers, these works—whatever the author’s gender, class, race, or politics—are unavoidably part of capitalist reproduction and corporate prestige enhancement.

Hence, while attempts to comprehend the structural logics of the world literary system may at first sight appear to shelve reckonings with class, gender, or race, it can be argued that to change that system, one must first uncover its operative structural logics. This is what Casanova wanted to do in her work. It makes little sense, in my view, to be “against world literature,” or to think that one can improve matters by pluralizing the problem (not one but many world literatures), or to think that author diversity as such resolves much. It makes more sense to ask what would it take to create a different kind of literary world system, one operating by post-capitalistic logics, and with ambitions to create literatures not less but more ambitious—however, we define “ambitious”—than those associated with the higher reaches of modernism, realism, Romanticism, etc.

I will conclude with some remarks on epic as this completes the circle by connecting Esty and McGlynn. Esty notes my study's concern with epics of different kinds, and McGlynn begs questions as to its relationship to Moretti's *Modern Epic* and the function of mini-epic. There is much to admire in Moretti's remarkable volume, but, as McGlynn rightly notes, for Moretti literature, whether realism in *The Bourgeois* or epic in *Modern Epic*, appears always to serve, in her words, 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 mode of analysis, in short, offers a repetitive functionalism in which modern literature serves primarily to adjust readers so as to make the contemporary capitalist order more psychically livable, and a little less distressing. This insistence is no doubt a corrective to valorizations of every work of literature as charged with consequential subversions. However, is there any reason to think that enabling psychic adjustment is literature's only function? For all his brilliance, Moretti sacrifices dialectic to a dubious critical scientism.

My interest in epic in all its varieties has to do with the form's remarkable ambitions and its importance to the representation of transformative events: revolutions, historical transitions, national emergencies, class defeats, and lost causes. I also admire the form's tendency to capsize conventional distinctions between poetry and prose, narrative impetus and stylistic flamboyance, the quotidian round and the extraordinary event. There is much to admire, surely, in epic's refusal of the narrow specializations that inform literary as well as nonliterary kinds of work. To answer McGlynn, I do not think that mini-epics pave the path to commodification; my argument is that they lend themselves better to university classrooms than do grand epics that challenge timetables and attention spans in a world that values regimented rapidity and quick turnover. The issue is not mini-epics but rather rigid timetabling perhaps!

For these reasons, I find myself more in sympathy with Hannah Arendt's essay on the modern novel than with Moretti's *Modern Epic*. In a 1947 review in *The Kenyon Review* of Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, Arendt writes, in a passage I have cited elsewhere, that:

The novels of Proust, Joyce and Broch (as well as those of Kafka and Faulkner who, however, each in his own way is in a class by himself) show a conspicuous and curious affinity with poetry on the one hand and to philosophy on the other. Consequently, the greatest modern novelists have begun to share the poets' and philosophers' confinement to a relatively small, select circle of readers. In this respect, the tiny editions of the greatest works and the huge editions of good second-rate books are equally significant. A gift for storytelling which half a century ago could be found only among the great is today frequently the common equipment of good but essentially mediocre writers. Good second-rate production, which is as far removed from *kitsch* as it is from great art, satisfies fully the demands of the educated and art-loving public and has the more effectively estranged the great masters from their audience than the much-feared mass culture. More important for the artist himself is that a widespread possession of skill

and craftsmanship and a tremendous rise in the general level of performance have made him suspicious of facility and mere talent.²

Modernist epic's conspicuous and curious affinity with poetry and philosophy, yes, but also, we might add, with the history of the *longue dureé* and with politics. In addition, not just with poetry in the more elevated sense but also with ballads and songs, with higher and more plebian forms. Arendt doesn't at all subscribe to a declinist view that literary standards, in general, are in collapse, that everything is being swept into the culture industry's kitschy maw. No, she contends that "the gift for storytelling" is refined and generalized now to a level that once made Balzac and Dickens, Georges Sand and George Eliot nineteenth-century greats. Today, this "rise in the general level of performance" means that "frequently the common equipment of good but essentially mediocre writers," writers of "talent," is actually more common than before. In other words, there are more skilled practitioners than ever of what we might nowadays call "the literary novel" or "good middle-class fiction," but even these writers and works now appear somewhat in the shadow of the more extraordinary feats of Joyce, Proust, Broch, Mann, Stein, and many others. These higher achievements, Arendt acknowledges, have not been without cost; they have been bought at the expense of the wider readerships Balzac, Sand, Eliot, or Dickens enjoyed. Grander epic ambitions, smaller select readerships.

The entirely understandable response when confronted with this situation, one compounded of amazing literary possibilities but also risking the worst kinds of auteur elitism and solipsistic retreats from the public sphere (if such still exists), is to dismiss these impossibly demanding works as "hypercanonical" or "hypermale," and so on. And to valorize instead other media and more accessible everyday cultural forms in the manner of cultural studies. Or, to celebrate the perfectly good "literary novel" and to work to diversify production of that mode in gender, class, racial, regional, and other ways. This is largely the response favored by the contemporary Anglophone university in a period characterized, as McGlynn properly notes, by ever-widening appropriations of wealth by a cosmopolitan plutocracy and ever-deepening immiseration for vast swatches of the world's population.

What other options are there in such a wretched world than to say let's do what little we can by the most immediate means available? What other indeed? The only alternative might be to democratize education upward and outward such that even a Joyce or Stein might be within reach of all with interest in their works. And to reduce the working week for all so that the arts might do more than simply adjust us to our wretched capitalist exigencies or compensate for our limited lives. And to remake society to encourage creative works of all kinds—collectively as well as individually produced—that do not merely document our historical traumas and ongoing quotidian miseries but expand our sense of human possibilities. Utopian? Deluded? Bombastic?

² Hannah Arendt, "The Achievement of Hermann Broch," *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1949): 476–83.

Maybe. But if the global workforce is becoming ever more productive, as we are told it is, what other purpose should all that productivity serve? The only alternatives to progressively diminished expectations are outrageously extravagant ones.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

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