



BOOK FORUM

The Irreparable Library

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Joe Cleary's new book understands modernist literature as the efflorescence of "a moment when the Western European literary system" was "decisively restructured"¹ such that the "English literary capital became just one node (though still an important one) in a more complex circuit of Anglophone literary transmission" (4). The challenge Cleary presents himself is to "conceptualize the dialectical connections" between this process of literary revolution and the "wider changes underway within the world capitalist system" (19), namely, England falling out of its global hegemonic position and the United States taking its place. Cleary rightly positions such a move as an improvement on the work of Pascale Casanova in particular, whose *The World Republic of Letters* already thoroughly conceived the world-literary system as a terrain of struggle between central national traditions and restive, competitive, and ingenious peripheries. Highlighting Irish, American, and Caribbean threats to the dominance of English literary authority, Cleary describes, as Casanova does, the status of the literary subsidiary as a provocation that caused writers with aspirations to greatness to challenge, unsettle, and ultimately unseat British English dominance of the world literary system.²

Cleary's three national cases differ here though, quite markedly, in the relative power of their provocations: between 1890 and the Cold War, he argues, Irish and American writers play a key role in the whole system's restructuring, whereas Caribbean literature emerges after this period, as more of a belated expression of the restructuring having already happened. Irish and American modernisms serve as "powerful decolonizing forces" whose "revolt against the cultural supremacy of London represented a revolt in the peripheries against the center and an emancipation from one long-standing kind of English literary

¹ Joe Cleary, *Modernism, Empire, World Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2021), 11.

² I wish to thank Sheri-Marie Harrison for the discussions that have shaped this work.

dominance” (13), Cleary writes. In turn, however, when these respective interventions are situated in relation to the changing global political terrain, we see how the literary “issue” of their revolutionary impetus “would eventually be assimilated ... by an ascendant United States” (13), becoming a prestige cultural accompaniment to American higher-education expansion and economic and military dominance. Caribbean literature fits in here, in Cleary’s argument, as one formation within a globalized English—an English that readily absorbs new styles and voices, but whose existence is firmly dependent on the United States as cultural broker and arbiter of value. (As a side note, it is a shame that despite the efforts of the editor of this forum, there is no Caribbean literature specialist contributing to it; such a scholar may have more informed thoughts than mine about the conception of Caribbean literary output as an annex of US cultural hegemony.)

The bulk of Cleary’s study consists of deft close readings of canonical literary works—works that established new kinds of literary authority as writers sought to explore their own positions within both national traditions and the shifting terrain of world-literary prestige. For instance, in his reading of *Ulysses*—the “Scylla and Charybdis” chapter in particular—Stephen Dedalus and Shakespeare, like Joyce himself, of course, appear as “similar provincial aspirants or passionate pilgrims” (176) who forsake their homes to achieve fame, and need to demolish the sneering pretenses of the old literary authorities to assume their new positions of power. *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and *The Waste Land* (1922) are, for their part, read as deliberations on “the shifting balance of world power as Western European global supremacy began to wane and the United States commenced its ascent to world power” (107). In Cleary’s reading, Eliot in particular, “groping for some form of renewal that might lead beyond modernity’s mess and morbidity” (133), and envisioning a polyglot global Anglophone literature that subordinates other European languages in favor of playful activity *within* English, ends up neatly anticipating the US’s hegemonic formation as the fount of liberal capitalist democracy and heart of global affairs. Decades later, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *A Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1939–1941), an ascendant US high culture orchestrates and exhibits its dominance over low forms by registering modernity as disaster: “dazzling rags-to-riches ‘success’ turns out to be a counterfeit achievement leading to destruction” (202), Cleary reminds us. If American modernist literature is, in some way, a “salvage operation” (107) taking European culture into the hands of United States, the country’s “greatest literary works could never wholly endorse the idea of American greatness” (199).

Once again, Cleary’s argument about the Caribbean—with Derek Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* as his core text—importantly differs from his cases for Irish and American literature, reflecting the relative status of the region in the global hierarchy of wealth and modernity. He writes that “creation of a new Caribbean Anglophone literary can be celebrated as the emergence of a new ‘fourth province’ of English literature.” However, he wants to explore the difference it makes when literary production occurs “in conditions of ongoing foreign domination, racial division and economic subordination” (249). His conclusions come mainly from a reading of *Omeros* as Walcott’s meditation on his own

incorporation into US university creative writing programs and corporate publishing. *Omeros* evinces Walcott's concern about making images of "poor fisherfolk" (256) or tourist industry service workers palatable fare for commodification and consumption within those centers of power. Through poetry, Walcott laments building his cultural capital on depictions of destitution. Cleary writes that "the Caribbean world the poem summons into being assimilates its European colonial masters and cultures only to find itself become an American-dominated tourist pleasure periphery" (47). *Omeros* is thus "an epic work that attempts both to register the conditions of its own possibility in a neoimperial and now-American-centered world literary system," and "a rather desperate attempt to overcome these conditions by a kind of aesthetic fiat" (250). In this way, according to Cleary, Walcott provides a deflated exploration of the literary itself as basically useless as a response to the plight of the people of his own country Saint Lucia.

Reading this account of Walcott's work, I started to wonder about using Cleary's terms to understand other figures, and my mind turned to the "irreparable library" so memorably depicted in *A Small Place*, Jamaica Kincaid's wonderfully searing postcolonial anti-tourist guidebook to Antigua. Like Walcott, Kincaid was born in the Caribbean, has made her career in the United States, and has been extensively studied and appreciated. She grew up in Antigua and was thus a student in the British education system. In school, she encountered—often uneasily—many of the classics of English literature. She has described her love of reading and her ambivalent relationship to many of the great literary classics in various talks, as well as in fictionalized semi-autobiographical forms: in the novels *Annie John*, about an Antiguan childhood, and in *Lucy*, which charts a young woman's move from Antigua to New York where she works for a time as a nanny for a wealthy white family.

A Small Place's irreparable library was a place Kincaid recounts once enjoying. It was destroyed in an earthquake in the 1970s, and never repaired because successive governments have had limited social spending capacity and gave priority to tourism development rather than serving the social service needs of the local population. Kincaid writes:

the old building where the library used to be was occupied by, and served as headquarters for, a carnival troupe. The theme of the carnival troupe was 'Angels from the Realm,' and it seemed to me that there was something in that [...] Where the shelves of books used to be, where the wooden tables and chairs used to be, where the sound of quietness used to be, where the smell of the sea used to be, where everything used to be, was now occupied by costumes: costumes for angels from the realm.³

Resources are designated for tourist pleasure, and they require cloaking the region's history in a fabled innocence—an angelic costume—so as not to burden visitors with anything that might threaten their good time and self-regard. A

³ Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 46.

Small Place aims instead to disenchant at every turn: Kincaid makes crystal clear that the irreparable library exists because of the history of colonial plunder, lack of investment in infrastructure and development by colonial and then postcolonial regimes, and the exploitation of workers with little choice but to accept meager pay, helped along by attractive government policies that let neocolonial tourism conglomerates do very little beyond maintain their own grounds and facilities and expropriate surplus profit. Needless to say, perhaps—absent even a local library—these are conditions in which support for training and development of writers are harder to find than they are elsewhere. This too must be part of any materialist approach to the formation and nature of the world-literary system: that the wealth to modernize in one place, to orchestrate a modernity, comes at the cost of immiseration elsewhere, and this bears more or less directly upon the aspiration and opportunity to pursue a writing career.

For Kincaid, furthermore, a clear aspect of the poverty of this whole non-inheritance is her sheer dependence on “language of the criminal.” In this respect, we can perhaps counterpose Kincaid’s reflections with Cleary’s. Here is Cleary’s remarks on the cultivation of reverence for the English language and literature:

the nation’s most famous writers, intellectuals and literary critics were admired not just in England but across the English-speaking empire. English publishing houses circulated English-language texts, bibles, dictionaries, grammars, readers, encyclopaedias, treasuries of hymns and verse—across the world. New school systems and academies in the colonies encouraged reverence for things English. (6)

Here is Kincaid:

For isn’t it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal’s deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. And when I blow things up and make life generally unlivable for the criminal (is my life not unlivable, too?) the criminal is shocked, surprised. But nothing can erase my rage—not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal—for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?⁴

In Kincaid’s treatment, the experience of reverence is reserved for school children. For adult writers, English instead always signifies the tragedy of the genocidal erasure of inconvenient people, leaving nothing but the conqueror’s

⁴ Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988, 31–2.

language. She finds herself then trying, in her work, “impossible” though it is, to make English contain the horror of the deed—to register “the agony and humiliation.” This is the meaning of what she describes as her “visit to the bile duct”: “look at how bitter, how dyspeptic just to sit and think about these things makes me”.⁵ The point is that she uses the language in a way that is, at least, bilious.

The perfect crystallization of this technique—of Kincaid’s bilious repertoire for engaging a cursed inheritance—features in *Lucy*, in its treatment of William Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” “I wandered lonely as a cloud”—a poem marking a memory of encountering a field of daffodils, “Fluttering and dancing in the breeze,” and cherishing the role that memory plays now in the speaker’s “inward eye” as he reposes on his couch. The beauty of the flower’s image pleases immediately but also in perpetuity; the perfection of the daffodils is always there. Such beauty is captured in the poem in turn, of course, as part of the English tradition that Cleary is concerned with—both in its once supreme dissemination and in its decolonial unseating. How differently, then, do the daffodils figure in *Lucy*?

The protagonist remembers being forced to memorize the poem in school. An excellent student and natural reader, this task gives her little challenge and no small pleasure, and she delights—in part—in being praised for her success. She also feels, though, “at the height of my two-facedness” (18), and later dreams of being smothered by daffodils, a flower she has never seen around herself in Antigua. She is meant to accept that the most beautiful memory imaginable, providing calm in any storm, is a *flower* she has never seen, and she is meant to think that the job of literature is to memorialize and celebrate these pleasures and the comfort they provide to any of life’s weary humans. However, she cannot; she simply does not have the same “inner eye” as the speaker of that poem. Instead, her inner eye is something else entirely. She sees the imposition of the English canon by the education system in her “small place.” She sees the establishment of cultural authority via something that is not available to her—a repertoire of images but also a simple pleasure in life that she finds frankly unfathomable (“How do you get to be that way?”⁶ she wonders).

Eventually, Lucy does see real daffodils when the well-meaning woman who employs her as a nanny, despite knowing her story of the poem, takes her to a field of them blindfolded and forces her to look at them, thinking that by simply seeing them there in their apparent innocence, all of history will disappear and Lucy will finally delight in their simple beauty. Lucy takes them in and then reflects: “they looked beautiful; they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did now know what these flowers were, so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them” (29). Before she even knows really, what she is looking at, she possesses some deep awareness that this is Wordsworth’s flower. Not hers. Never quite hers. The idea of the daffodils’ angelic beauty is not grasped by Lucy at all. She instead immediately registers its flipside: the history that gave them meaning to

⁵ Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988, 32.

⁶ Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 20.

her, which to Mariah, her employer, is “complicated and unnecessary” and due to be erased. Lucy refuses this erasure. That is her inner eye. There is no beauty that does not cover over and suppress this other side.

Returning then to Cleary’s arguments, could one not say that all his points are made here again? Kincaid built her career as a writer in New York. She began to become known at a time when her priorities aligned curiously well with the shifting terrain of US English departments, with the canon wars unseating “dead white men” and instead including, at least in addition, writers like Kincaid. To be sure, this is the restive energy of the periphery perpetuating Anglophone literary prestige by revivifying it through challenge and contest, unmaking and remaking? And we can stress too—echoing something of Cleary’s treatment of Walcott—just how little Kincaid registers any of this as actually decolonial, or as any kind of victory. Instead, we have this sustained inquiry, relentless across a whole oeuvre, that impugns the capitalist colonial extraction that killed her Carib Indian ancestors and made Antigua poor, that has continued to put the wealthy leisured tourist and the industry that serves them above the needs of the people who live and struggle to work there.

It impugns the spread of all those texts that ostensibly expressed and generated veneration of the tradition, that inculcated the value of English, the language of the criminal. It is in this respect, and simply due to thinking about a different writer and a different oeuvre, that I would depart just a little from Cleary’s emphases. I read Kincaid’s work less as a matter of worried assertion of national location or new literary dominance arising ambivalently from subsidiary status and more as a case of a subject pushing against its own formation. To find her audience, she has no choice but to enter the criminal sphere of English literary culture, but this is never a totally denuding incorporation. There is an endless negativity about capitalist modernity that compels her creativity—an unanswerable melancholy, propelled not least by the fact that the best one can do is register unending displeasure, “dyspeptic” disconsolation in the face of the non-choices on display. Unlike Walcott, it seems to me that Kincaid’s work is not overly concerned about the complicities and compromises of her own—of any—career in writing, and she does not tend toward self-reflexive gestures of worry about the terms of inclusion in the global Anglophone prestige canon. She is focused instead on the very making of her person by the historical unfolding of the coercive force of capitalism in its incorporating spread. For, as she asks, “can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?” The answer of course is “no,” and that “no” is in a serious way the very motivating occasion for Kincaid’s whole practice.

In this respect, it is perhaps useful to conclude by putting Cleary’s argument—that modernist literature marks the moment when “the literary system was decisively restructured”—in conversation with Neil Lazarus’s recent, rather different, claim that “modernist” is simply “the only plausible term for the vast body of literary work engendered by the worlding of capitalist social relations,” which are uneven within and across nations.⁷ Thinking about Kincaid’s work

⁷ Neil Lazarus, *Into Our Labours: Work and its Representation in World-Literary Perspective* (Liverpool University Press, 2022), 19.

alongside Walcott's inclines me more toward Lazarus's emphases: modernism in world literature is often enough about the experience of capitalist modernization, not in the sense of registering 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.

Following Lazarus's lead, in other words, Caribbean literature might be understood less as a self-tormented offshoot of US hegemony—though that may very well be the case for Walcott in particular—and more as a set of forms articulating various relations to the social totality of capitalist dominance. These forms are distinct but comparable to other literary situations, and porous and multiple in its relation to the Caribbean itself. Lazarus argues for a global comparative methodology, seeing various regional and national literatures arising not from generative rivalries between traditions but from any writer's respective position within the global totality of capitalist social relations. I would only add that it is this totality itself that dictates that some literatures are doomed to be the reluctant source of restive energy in the English language, doomed to be only *conceptually* decolonial, and doomed to be celebrated in ways that (they know very well) do little to fix the situations of immiseration and maldistribution shaping their expressions all the way down. What kind of compensation, then, is the right to boast that one's literature energizes and reconfigures the circuit of Anglophone literary transmission? I feel that this is the key question that Cleary's book is really asking.

Author biography. Sarah Brouillette is the author of *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Palgrave 2007), *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford UP 2014), and *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (Stanford 2019). She is working on a book about publishing industry labour and social media.

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