

Title	The State of Irish Culture. Review of Joseph Cleary, Outrageous Fortune: Culture and Capital in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day, 2007)
Authors	Coughlan, Patricia
Publication date	2008-05-01
Original Citation	Coughlan, P. (2008) 'The State of Irish Culture. Review of Joseph Cleary, Outrageous Fortune: Culture and Capital in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day, 2007)' Irish Literary Supplement (April), pp. 2-5.
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-10-23 08:20:24
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14821

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Forcefully written and making wide sweeps over Irish literary history, Joe Cleary's book bids for attention from all those concerned with the state of contemporary Irish cultural, especially literary, production. Cleary's observations can be acute, he is a perceptive reader of drama and narrative, and his views admirable, as for instance his stance of resistance to the commodification of the aesthetic and to the negative effects, in Ireland as elsewhere, of the penetration of culture by global capital in postmodernity. The book is passionately felt and the ambition of its project to reshape prevailing assumptions in Irish literary history is creditable. So too is the aim to keep both aesthetic and political perspectives in play. But *Outrageous Fortune* is also provoking, in both positive and negative senses. Cleary enjoys polemic, and his argument typically moves to and fro between notionally opposite poles, often engaging in rhetorical feints. There are serious problems about both this rhetoric which carries the arguments, and the arguments themselves.

The volume was not conceived as a single project: six of its eight chapters (slightly over half its length) are versions of pieces published between 1995 and 2005. These include a strong, widely reprinted essay defending Cleary's signature postcolonialist position and a chapter on nineteenth-century "national novels"; the remainder addresses twentieth-century material, with some glances post-2000. Together with a poised Introduction, chapters on "Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland", and "Irish Naturalism" are what is new in the book.

The central argument can be summarised relatively easily. Put crudely, it is that Irish literature and culture reached its highest achievement during and immediately after the heroic phase of nationalist struggle. From the Revival to 1922, while Ireland was still ruled by Britain, and up to the 1940s while it was materially deprived, it nevertheless saw a remarkable flowering of great literature, the best of which was modernist in form and was produced by about five world-class writers. It is a predictable pantheon, primarily Yeats, Joyce, and Synge in the first generation, Beckett and Flann O'Brien in the second. All the masterpieces came before 1960, and most or all subsequent Irish literature is aesthetically inferior. Paradoxically, however, from the 1958 Lemass-Whitaker economic expansion programmes seeking inward investment up to the recent boom, when Ireland's material capital grew so markedly, its cultural capital, Cleary argues, startlingly diminished. The finest writers of this latter period have not, jointly or severally, approximated the paradigm-changing power of their great predecessors. Central to this alleged failure is their adherence, for the most part, to a realist aesthetic (which Cleary elects to call "naturalism").

Prominent novelists and playwrights of the 1960s-'80s are accused of reproducing the "grim monochrome" of the society whose oppressions they were protesting. Their successors (or they themselves, later on) have devoted themselves to "slaying the shrivelled dragons of 'de Valera's Ireland'". Hapless batches of practitioners are lined up and raked with fire: for their deplorably recidivist "naturalism", aesthetic reproduction of the very "dowdiness and narrowness of vision" they denounce thematically, lack of "any sense of collective agency", and funnelling of "any sense of social protest" into "individual rebellion". Sometimes the invigorating energies of Cleary's language come to feel like browbeating: as if these

retrograde individualists, and presumably their readers and audiences at home and abroad, not to speak of any critics who might attend to them, need re-education.

Furthermore, not all the grounds on which he takes issue with this writing are mutually reconcilable. One is that naturalism – considered as a formal recourse with political aims – had already long lost its edge of critique before the 1960s. Therefore work by, say, McGahern or Edna O’Brien, however powerful, must *a priori* have lacked the potential for social radicalism. Oppressive late-nineteenth-century social conditions were what prompted the original naturalism (French, Russian, English) as an outraged response; the protests and resistances of Irish 1960s realist writing are condemned as out of phase. Yet Frank O’Connor remarked that to grow up in an Irish town before 1925 was “to have known the nineteenth-century novel as a contemporary art form”. Had Clare or Leitrim been so transformed by the era of O’Brien (b. 1929) and McGahern (b. 1934), as to make redundant the intense moment of dissent from dominant social values which they both, and each differently, voice?

At other moments Cleary shifts ground, grants the existence of such stultifying conditions and directs his reproof instead to the alleged individualism of these texts. Here he works with too narrow a definition of politics and, like the old-fashioned vulgar Marxist he certainly is not, implicitly treats the whole category of subjectivity as lesser than collectivity. Such an approach misses the vital thrust of ’60s and ’70s interrogations of Irish values and social dispensations, ignoring that period’s recognition of the inextricable imbrication of personal and political: this, of course, bears especially on women’s work. Despite invocations of Adorno, Cleary so straitens the purview of acceptable thematics and approved ideological aims that he bypasses some of the principal insights of Adorno’s vision, which dwelt painfully but steadfastly on the continuing responsibility of serious thought towards this category of subjectivity, without relinquishing the interwoven imperatives of social justice or solidarity. We don’t have to be formalists to believe that critical narratives should be capable of adapting their imperatives to the peculiar character of the terrain they map. Might it not be impertinent to call writers to account because their work (allegedly) fails to make utopian projections beyond the dystopic actuality? This demand for the upbeat uncomfortably recalls the Abbey’s notorious scrutiny of new plays for “p.q.” (“peasant quality”), itself becoming a closing-off rather than the opening-up it says it seeks.

Some of this is explained by considering Cleary’s book as part of a (broadly nationalist) backlash against widespread repudiation in contemporary Ireland of earlier dominant ideologies. He deploys perspectives from dependency- and world-systems-theory to associate this repudiation with a misguided and mistaken capitulation to the growing global hegemony of development and modernization, considered as forms of domination. But in so doing, he is forced by his own argument effectively to disallow that moment of genuine and necessary resistance to, principally, home-grown instances and institutional structures of oppression which is evident in post-1960 literature. Despite moments when previous narrowness and repressions are acknowledged, this bid to revise the revision entails implicit valorisation of previous decades along it-wasn’t-so-bad-really lines (more usually associated with reactionary responses to the ’90s-’00s boom).

The emergence of ideologically critical Irish literature is conflated with the economic turn towards inward-investment policies; but there are major strains in the attempt to align

economic and political histories too narrowly with that of literature, risking reductive and reflectionist results. The sweeping generality with which left-postcolonialist perspectives are applied exacerbates these tensions. *Outrageous Fortune* suffers in comparison with *That Neutral Island*, Clair Wills' outstanding study of World War II Ireland, which offers detailed textures and truly material analysis, also showing generosity of spirit in its imaginative sympathy for a wider range of communal and individual lives and of writings.

Another problem is the book's dependence on reiterated assertions of world-class achievement by Irish authors who effected global paradigm shifts, while these world literary judgements are themselves apparently not up for analysis or questioning. There is a fixed reliance on criteria of aesthetic evaluation which theorists and critics of canonisation processes and of literary institutions have in fact very thoroughly interrogated and shown to be riddled with conventionality and linguistic, ethnic, gender and class bias. In the light of the oft-expressed awareness that global capital interpenetrates all social and cultural life, there is something oddly provincial about this repeated gesturing to the opinion of the world outside as normative.

There is a curious fixedness too about the reliance upon a monolithic concept of "modernism". While general postcolonialist theory is extensively invoked, there is a tendency to obliviousness of developments outside Ireland in specifically literary criticism. The book identifies a "broader goal" of locating Irish cultural developments in a "broader comparativist analytic frame" than previous cultural scholarship, but shows no interest in the wealth of new international modernism scholarship which has rendered plural the notion of modernism itself, upon which the argument depends. Cleary does not register the altered critical understandings, in several respects, of the era and its art which the last two decades have produced. So he misses the richly informed sense of material contexts, and of forms *as* material, both in Ireland and elsewhere (and among other things the role of women practitioners who, contrary to his allegation of modernist masculinism, were valued). In this sense as in others the book situates itself half outside the operation of literary criticism, considered as a work of continuous reinterpretation, dialogue and modification. The petrified (male) "A-list" of great writers implicitly disavows that interpenetration among writers, places, genres and modes which current thought finds a marked feature of modernist cultures. The nostalgia for certainties recalls, of all things, the mandarin, displaced-priestly, pronouncements of high-aesthetic critics such as Denis Donoghue (whom Cleary specifically deprecates).

Rhetorically, a repeated move involves arguing for a position which is then nimbly disowned. For instance, one page develops an energetic Frankfurt-School-inspired critique of, say, postmodern culture; the next disavows "bargain-basement Adornean diatribes". This switchback rhythm is wearying, recalling the debating club and more disingenuous than dialectical. Occasionally the desire to have it both ways produces contradiction: the text says "the weight of [Northern] state oppression has never... fallen equally on both communities", then a footnote adds "[t]he issue, surely, is not which community sinned or suffered most, but to understand the forces and structures that conditioned both communities' actions and dispositions". If this latter is the more productive formulation, then why is the former needed?

Cleary is much stronger on social narrative (including drama) than on poetry, which either does not attract his imagination, or does not accommodate itself to his schema. The specific histories of Irish twentieth-century poetry unfortunately, therefore, go unremarked. This generic narrowness can also vitiate the detailed argument, as is evident in the treatment of both Kavanagh and Kinsella. *The Great Hunger* is misconstrued as naturalist and disparaged along with later realist drama and fiction. Its mode is far better described as expressionist: the narrow, nightmarish, almost hallucinatory quality of its vision is its very strength, dwelling inescapably on a single voice whose tones vary only between anger, despair, and an occasional vision of natural beauty compounded of sub-Blakean antinomies and Catholic mysticism.

Equally problematic is the approach to Kinsella, a figure of uncompromising power and major reputation. Listed among other allegedly “wan late modernists” (e.g. Mahon) he is then ignored except for a footnote deploring the relative absence of critical attention to him. This repeated manoeuvre (cousin to the more general advance-retreat move already described) name-checks a figure or topic, asserts its disgraceful neglect, then passes on, thus taxing others with a culpable omission while oneself doing nothing to repair it. Ó Cadhain gets similarly contentless, though less disparaging, treatment. The Basket autobiographies (good) are summoned to do shadow-battle with Arensberg and Kimball’s 1930s anthropology (bad), but without supporting research or argument. Irish-language culture generally suffers foreshortening and false totalisation: the realm of vernacular traditions is vaguely gestured at and implicitly construed as unitary and homogeneous.

Inflexibility and reliance on fixed aesthetic prescription is further evident in the extraordinarily dismissive treatment of Irish postmodernists. Postmodernism is represented purely from modernism’s viewpoint, with a dispiritingly doctrinaire reliance on Jameson’s critique of postmodernism (persuasive when formulated, but surely not the last word). Postmodernist thought itself is not countenanced, though its wholesale dismissal is odd and limiting in what announces itself as a discussion of contemporary culture. There is definitely no Derrida, despite the claims to valorise the ludic. Along with the “naturalists” the book marginalises, almost quarantines, Muldoon, Banville, and McGuckian, a fate incurred by their adherence to “self-consciously postmodernist agendas”: their substance and international recognition is, once again, glancingly acknowledged. Banville and Muldoon are labelled “belated” and, in distastefully sneering tones, as a “de-energized tail end of the hectic Irish modernist literary experiment”. An egregious parallel aligns their alleged rump relation to Irish modernism with the role of vapid commercially confected 1990s boybands Boyzone and Westlife as, for their part, “vastly more degraded corollaries” of Bono, Morrison, Geldof and Sinéad O’Connor. These latter win approval as part of what is repeatedly called the “musical ferment” in Irish mass-popular culture, and high culture c. 1980-2000 is found wanting their vitality (this despite the thorough interpenetration by capital of these musicians’ cultural performance). No-one would deny their vigour or intermittent capacity to make piquant interrogations of dominant ideologies (though there is something of a time-lag in Cleary’s representation of this ferment as “current”). But lining up Bono and Co. as “the only figures of really comparable stature” with the “high modernist literary giants” discredits Cleary’s own reliance on the invocation of world distinction. This category stretch between the high literary sphere and a thoroughly market-driven mass culture distorts the book’s trajectory, leaving the unfortunate impression of validating a McGowan at the expense of a McGahern: a false alternative.

The final chapter, on the Pogues, endorses Shane McGowan's self-projection as sub-Baudelairean *maudit*, reading his excesses as a form of Bakhtinian carnival. The underlying position has a curiously elegiac quality: everything after *Godot* (itself scarcely offering a hopeful collective vision) falls away from past glories. Only McGowan, latter-day hero, intimates a utopian route (vaguely delineated, but anyway combining drink and defiance) out of the social-realist impasse. Yet the lead Pogue is a fallen man, weakened by the bloodsucking demands of the market system and humanly incapable of sustaining the carnival performance over the touring circuit.

Finally, the book's investment in the traditional canon unfortunately replicates its masculinism. Women writers are largely ignored: Bowen gets a spear-carrier's role, among the "nearly all" of our distinguished twentieth-century writers born in the nineteenth, but does not make the upper echelon of "decisive international figures" including O'Casey and MacNeice. Acknowledging Bowen as a remarkable late Irish modernist whose reputation is increasing internationally would have fractured Cleary's narrative. Ignored also is the content of the gender critique which has played such a shaping role in contemporary Ireland. Acknowledgements of the women's movement among other social struggles are strictly perfunctory: the specific content of women's interventions in intellectual fields including literature goes undiscussed. While the Introduction acknowledges feminism as one of three main blocs of adherence in contemporary criticism, it immediately qualifies this in a tendentious footnote attempt to recruit feminism to nationalism by virtue of *Field Day's* (male) editors' willingness to embrace the women's volumes (4 and 5), within their project: this is assumed to repair the prior large-scale omission of women's work. In reality, tensions are growing between nationalist and feminist critics: many perceive the re-emergence of old nationalist tendencies to contain and marginalise women's discursive authority as potentially disruptive to the primary, more or less identitarian, narrative. Cleary's adversarial approach to the whole critical enterprise will not help to defuse this potential contest of emancipations.

Contemporary women's writing is rendered almost invisible. McGuckian is mentioned only to be dismissed, like other postmodernists; Ní Chuilleanáin, Boland, Morrissy, Ní Dhomhnaill, Enright, Haverty, are all absent (although the last three would fit very well into Cleary's semi-approved "ludic" category of contemporary writing (which *can* embrace Patrick McCabe and Martin McDonagh). The only extensive analysis of a woman writer's work – a three-page discussion of Edna O'Brien's trilogy – shows the play of Cleary's critical intelligence. But the lack of developed gender perspectives combines with his general realist-impasse doctrine to close off the perceptive moments in his interpretation, which convicts O'Brien of simultaneous aesthetic and ideological failure for allowing depressive Kate to overcome Baba's utopian potential. In respect of this alleged incapacity to "think otherwise", projecting beyond the dark present, she belongs with her male contemporaries.

One chapter ostensibly addressing feminine roles does not reassure. It conflates Sinéad O'Connor's God-as-Mother with moving statues, a Bolger play and the film *Into the West*, to posit a re-emerging maternal supernatural in the depressed '80s. (Play and film deploy white-horse-mother-figures who save the heroes). These are linked with Bachhofen's half-baked notions of ur-matriarchy and presented as expressing inchoate cultural needs amid mass unemployment, increasing dependency on foreign investment and ever-greater integration

into the late-capitalist world-order. All this is rehearsed to resist the bugbear of those “liberal” narratives of modernity-defeating-tradition and shrinking religious practice. The discussion is sophisticatedly aware of the always-already-mediatised status of symbols in postmodernity. But celebrating these allegedly empowering versions of motherhood ignores the immobilization, silencing and objectification of women on which they depend. As Žižek observed, awareness of the presence of stereotypes doesn’t necessarily weaken their “fictional or affective force”, and “cynical distance is one of many ways to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy”.

In sum, *Outrageous Fortune* has vigour and panache, but ultimately its tendentious rhetoric, imaginative and ideological prescriptiveness, and masculinism disappoint expectation.

Patricia Coughlan
University College, Cork