CHAPTER 1

'A Language That Was English': Peripheral Modernisms and the Remaking of the Republic of Letters in the Age of Empire

> [British literature] was kept alive during the last century by a series of exotic injections [. . .] There was a faint waft of early French influence. Morris translated sagas, the Irish took over the business for a few years; Henry James led, or rather preceded, the novelists, and then the Britons resigned *en bloc*; the language is now in the keeping of the Irish (Yeats and Joyce); apart from Yeats, since the death of Hardy, poetry is being written by Americans. All the developments in English verse since 1910 are due almost wholly to Americans. In fact, there is no longer any reason to call it English verse, and there is no present reason to think of England at all.
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> We speak a language that was English.
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> Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', *New York Herald Tribune*, 1929.[1]

> So one effect of the twentieth century's International Modernism was that 'English' ceased to belong in its totality to a people resident on one storied island where they shared usages, intonations, hence memory, a history. Until recently it was they who had owned it all; if you were not one of them and chose to write in English, you either courted assimilation, like Washington Irving, or remained a barbarian, like Herman Melville. Such American or Irish literature as mattered was English Literature that by some accident had been written somewhere else. But now England's literature became a special case, the literature of one province among several. It is all like the separation of the French and Spanish literatures from Latin, which in turn mutated in its homeland into Italian.
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> Hugh Kenner, 'The Three Provinces', in *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers*, 1983.[2]

I

This book is about modernism and the remaking of the modern world literary system in the period between approximately 1890 and the 1950s. More specifically, it is a study of the rise of Irish and American literary

modernisms in the decades immediately before and after World War I, and of the various ways in which these modernisms contributed to the eventual transformation of the London-centred English literary world in the same period that English went on to displace French as a 'global language'. The final chapter on Derek Walcott's *Omeros* extends the study into the late twentieth century, examining a major poem from the Caribbean that wrestles with a literary system no longer centred in Europe but now in the United States. The observations of Ezra Pound and Hugh Kenner that serve as epigraphs to this chapter anticipate the history that this book investigates. With Pound and Kenner, I share the view that the ambitions that inspired early twentieth-century English-language high modernism came in the main from a revolt in the peripheries of the Anglophone literary world against long-established English metropolitan literary dominance. In its early stages at least, that revolt came primarily from Ireland and the United States; later, and in some similar, some different ways, literary and political movements in the Caribbean and other parts of the Anglophone world triggered further significant changes to the wider Anglophone literary system.

In the nineteenth century and up to World War I and beyond, London dominated the world of English-language letters. English writers and critics and English publishing houses and journals set the terms for what mattered in 'English literature' not just in Great Britain but across the English-speaking world, then largely a colonial world. In the era when what we now know as 'high modernism' flourished, the more or less absolute dominance of London was broken. Irish writers like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats and James Joyce, and American writers including Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Eugene O'Neill were too significant to be relegated to the margins of 'English literature'. The kinds of works they produced were too different to those of the great English Romantic and Victorian poets and dramatists and too foreign to the works of the great English realist novelists neatly to accommodate some expanded 'great tradition' of English literature. Besides, the Americans in this era were developing their own elite universities and producing critics more cosmopolitan-minded and receptive to new currents in European literature than most of their English contemporaries. These critics were no longer content to take their literary tastes or leads only from London. From the Gilded Age onwards, Americans were building museums and galleries, great concert halls and orchestras, and great public and private libraries in a bid to match or outdo Europe culturally. The United States' immense

wealth and increasing global power in this period allowed it to acquire old and new art collections from all over the world, and especially from Europe, and it also attracted European sculptors, composers, directors and architects to its shores. Long a cultural colony of Great Britain, the United States was ceasing to be so and becoming a 'world leader' in the arts in its own right. After World War II and during the Cold War, the American state made even greater efforts to assert an American presence in the arts and literature in Europe and beyond.

The Irish case was clearly different. The Irish Free State came into existence in 1922. After a civil war, that state was consolidated in the same decade that *Ulysses* was published, that Yeats published his first version of *A Vision*, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, and that Sean O'Casey's 'Dublin Trilogy' (*The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars*) was produced in Dublin. Yeats and Shaw won their respective Nobel Prizes in Literature in that decade, Yeats in 1923, Shaw in 1925. Dublin would never possess the great clusters of libraries, museums, art houses or concert halls that afforded New York such tremendous lustre as it rose to become a great world city and centre for the arts. The Irish universities or literary circles did not produce critics of a stature to match T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Edmund Wilson, R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Lionel Trilling, Richard Ellmann, Clement Greenberg and so many others who would make such significant contributions to English-language literary or art criticism almost everywhere. However, whereas the Americans took over from the British in running a world empire, the Irish broke with an empire and had the audacity to establish their own state and to cultivate a literature of some distinction in its own right. The significance of this achievement was not lost on contemporaries. In Harlem and the Caribbean, in India and China, in Korea and Nigeria, in Russia and Australia, the Irish example was noted with interest. It wasn't just the Swedish Academy or American academic critics who took heed of the examples of J. M. Synge and Augusta Gregory, Joyce and Yeats, O'Casey and, later, Beckett. Elsewhere, writers like Lu Xun, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Derek Walcott were also attending to Irish examples. Their national situations and literary circumstances were naturally different to Ireland's, but the Irish case established that long-term colonial domination by British or other European powers did not have to mean enduring literary subsidiarity. In short, the combined efforts of the Irish and American literary writers and intellectuals in this period diminished nineteenth-century deference to London, showed that new cultural projects could be attempted in new ways, and made the

English literary capital just one node (though still an important one) in a more complex circuit of Anglophone literary transmission.

Nevertheless, although the narrative about the overthrow of English literary dominance that this book unfolds over its six chapters intersects with those of Pound and Kenner cited above, my account is more dialectical and historical materialist than theirs. The emergence of Irish and American and other later Anglophone literary modernisms has helped to provincialize English literature and permanently transform the Anglophone literary world. Yet, although these modernisms emerged initially from two long-standing cultural colonies of England, they developed in quite different national contexts and socio-literary situations. Early twentieth-century Ireland was engaged in a national liberation struggle to extricate itself from the British Empire, and the modernism that it produced in this moment emerged from a small, economically underdeveloped, largely agrarian colony, geographically proximate to London. American modernism was the product of a more distant former colony that had won its national independence much earlier, in the American Revolution, and the United States had by the early twentieth century become a continental-sized and industrially advanced nation-state already poised to take over from Great Britain as the world's leading political and economic superpower. The story of how these two modernisms of such different provenance intersected with each other at this momentous juncture in modern imperial history is a fascinating one, but one to which many if not most histories of modernism seem even now strangely oblivious or indifferent. To make sense of these interknitted histories, critics need to do more than to pair Irish and American writers comparatively or to close-read some of their works. The longer-term intellectual, cultural and material histories that underpinned the works of Henry James, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot or Derek Walcott also need to be part of any examination of the nature and consequence of their combined creations. The ways in which the literary system of the day conditioned these writers and their works, and, dialectically, the ways in which their works reflect and respond to the constraints of that system, need to be part of the analysis.

My concept of a world literary system owes much to Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, one of the more controversial works of literary scholarship in recent times.[3] For Casanova, as for world literary systems analysis more generally, the term 'world' refers not to something that necessarily enjoys planetary reach or compass, but rather 'to the quality of worldedness, the self-constituting and inner-directed force, of

a given world system'.[4] Thus conceived, a world system is a largely self-contained 'whole' or demarcated field with its own procedures of transmission and regulation. Hence, a world literary system is more than an aggregate of its component national or regional literatures: a 'world literary system' constitutes a unified if unequal structure in which the component national or regional literatures are competitively organized and stratified by the manner in which they are integrated into the larger whole.[5]

Some literal-minded critics will ask if a 'world literary system' is anything more than a phrase. Do such 'systems' even exist? It is true that 'systems' of this kind cannot be documented in the same way that the workings of a federation of universities, the archives and anthologies that constitute a national literature, or the transactions of a national academy might be. Though the two are not the same thing, nor one merely superstructure to the other, a world literary system has, like the capitalist world system, to be deduced from its laws of operation, the kinds of transactions it allows, what it enables and rewards. One has to work backwards from the observed effects or consequences of the system to begin to grasp how it might work. In seems evident enough that by the nineteenth century Britain and France were the world's two leading imperial as well as literary powers. For much of the modern period, France and French culture dominated the European continent. In an essay on the French novel written in 1949, the great German critic E. R. Curtius could attest without qualification to the long-standing dominance of French culture:

> Nations, like individuals, are distinguished by their gifts. As early as the twelfth century France supplied all of Europe with verse romances and narrative matter. In the nineteenth century, which for France begins in 1789, it outdoes all other nations in three fields: painting, the novel, and revolution. From David (1748–1825) to Cézanne (1839–1906) French painting dominates, as did Italian during the Renaissance, Spanish during the Baroque. It is not as though a talent of genius came to the fore from time to time; no, an abundance of first-rate masters is found together in a small area; they relieve each other, form schools, invent formulas, set the pace for all of Europe. Whoever wishes to learn how to paint must do so in France.[6]

What Curtius says of the French in nineteenth-century Europe applies in different respects to English writers and critics in the same era throughout the British colonies and dominions. The nineteenth-century English produced not just two or three great poets or novelists, but a steady succession of such talents. England's leading universities, distinguished literary

reviews, and that 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. Writers like Wordsworth and Shelley, Austen and Scott, Dickens and George Eliot, Tennyson and Browning, Carlyle and Mill, Arnold and Ruskin set the pace all over the English-speaking world as Curtius says the French painters, novelists and revolutionaries did all over Europe. Everywhere, from Ireland to the United States, Australia to South Africa, Canada to Nigeria, the educated classes interested in culture were largely Anglophile and looked for direction to what was happening in England. These elites, their luminaries often schooled in English universities or frequenting London's literary circles, often knew English literature far better than that of their own regions. In those cases where they did not actively discourage local literatures, they nevertheless held up English standards to their local writers as those to emulate. Writers and scholars from the colonies often moved to England to make their careers, or pined for contracts with English publishers, or for good reviews from the leading British reviews of the day. Just as other European cultures for a long time rotated like so many satellites around a sun that was Paris, so too the English-speaking cultures beyond England were drawn to smoggy London as to a candle.

A world literary system, however, is composed of more than just a capital and its subsidiaries. It depends on that capital's lasting capacity to produce a continuous relay of writers or painters, schools and coteries that 'invent formulas' in the manner Curtius describes. It requires that capital to be able to continue to give intellectual leadership, to set canons of taste and to secure reputations that will endure not just for a passing moment but a century or longer. The capital must be able to disseminate its influence beyond the nation-state by exerting a soft cultural sway over other far-scattered sub-capitals that work with the centre in a series of feedback loops. This circuitry of exchange operates most effectively if the sub-capitals are themselves lively hubs of creativity but still have reasons to defer to the authority of the centre because they cannot match it for material and intellectual resources and for some ineffable sense of greatness. A world literary system, then, becomes visible in what it produces and regulates. Its effects may be seen in the types of literary productions the system creates and canonizes and in the kinds of pilgrimages from periphery to centre it encourages and rewards over some *longue durée*. The

system is manifest in the kinds of stimuli, deferences and challenges – whether from older faded centres, other rival centres outside its bounds or its own sub-capitals – the centre can cultivate and manage to its advantage over a long period. Only when the centre cannot hold do things dramatically change; then, a new centre restructures an alternative system after its own interests.

Systems have histories. As Casanova tells it, the history of the modern world literary system is to a considerable extent the story of how Paris established itself as the world's leading literary capital by becoming from the early modern period onwards the city with the greatest literary prestige on earth. In her view, a formative episode was the establishment of the French Pléiade and the publication in 1549 of Joachim du Bellay's *La deffence et illustration de la langue françoyse*, a programme for the enrichment of the French language and manifesto for a new literature able to compete with the pan-European intellectual hegemony of Latin. By culturally asserting themselves against Latin, Casanova avers, the French established an early process of national literary differentiation – something that then became a basic organisational reflex of the modern world literary system, a recurrent, competitive, centrifugal impulsion that continues to this day. By the Age of Versailles, Casanova contends, Paris had already become a leading centre for the arts, fashion, civility, *belles lettres* and fine living, and the French language had established itself as the *lingua franca* of the aristocracies and intelligentsias all across Europe, and would remain so for several centuries to come. After 1789, Paris multiplied this already impressive *ancien régime* cultural capital by also becoming the city that symbolized the Revolution and Enlightenment modernity. Until World War II at least, the city's heady mixture of old-world cultural sophistication and vanguard political radicalism attracted a steady influx of political and artistic immigrants from abroad, and many nationalist movements and national literatures from across the world first found their tongues, so to speak, in French exile.[7]

Once France had consolidated its position at the centre of the European literary system, that system's next major overhaul and expansion, Casanova argues, was brought about by English and German pushbacks against French supremacy. By the end of the eighteenth century, through the efforts of men of letters, grammarians and lexicographers, the main outlines of modern English were fixed, though significantly without a centralizing legislative institution on the model of the Académie Française. If the French claimed to exemplify literary 'sophistication', 'worldliness' and 'rational universality', the English responded by laying claim to a literature

that was firmly rooted in the 'local' and 'national' and not, as its French rival pretended to be, abstractly 'universal'.[8] Such distinctions are the common stock-in-trade of national stereotype, but were nonetheless constitutively important to the deeper value systems that conditioned French and English literatures in the nineteenth century. In this period, the English challenge to French hegemony was abetted by its German counterpart. Goethe may be deemed the father-founder of modern German letters, but the decisive figure here, for Casanova, was Herder, whose theories 'brought about the first enlargement of literary space to include the European continent as a whole' (75). Herder's work not only formulated a rationale for German cultural emancipation from French hegemony, but 'also provided the theoretical basis for the attempt made in politically dominated territories, both in Europe and elsewhere, to invent their own solutions to the problem of cultural dependence' (75). Where French literary nationalism was unashamedly elitist, classicist or neoclassicist and universalist in self-conception, Herder proposed that an authentic national literature could only emerge via a long evolutionary process and that literary 'genius' and artistic fertility were best nurtured by a rootedness in national-popular vernacular traditions. This articulated the national and the popular in ways that, as Casanova puts it, 'shattered all the hierarchies, all the assumptions that until then had unchallengeably constituted literary "nobility" – and this for a very long time' (77). By asserting the dignity of all cultures and locating the sources of literary fertility or genius in the vernacular cultural life of the people as a whole, Herder's work re-wrote the rules of international literary consecration and prestige, and legitimated new mechanisms for the accumulation of international literary capital. For Herder, exemplary forms of national-popular literature included popular song, Ossian and Shakespeare.[9]

Viewed thus, a world literary system comes into being by means of international struggles for cultural distinction. Once the basic laws of mimetic rivalry between countries have been set in place, the system can then extend outwards and develop. As England and Germany in their revolt against French letters had established themselves as major cultural centres in their own right, so too in turn their respective intellectual provinces also began to contest English and German artistic domination. Thus, the English struggle against French supremacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was accompanied, more or less concurrently, by Irish and American attempts to bolster their resistances to English cultural domination. In the same period, the Scandinavians and Russians attempted to find ways to counter French and German

intellectual dominance. In this intellectually and aesthetically combative system, national literatures drew a large part of their self-definition from direct rivalries, long embedded, with other national spaces: German *vs* French, Scottish *vs* English, Irish *vs* English, Czech *vs* German, American *vs* English, Russian *vs* German and so forth.[10]

It is clear from this bald summary account that for Casanova the modern world literary system originated in Europe and found its centre of gravity in Paris when French became the adoptive culture for the upper classes and the higher intellectual strata all across that continent from Madrid to Moscow. That world system was then expanded outwards by way of a series of semi-peripheral nationalist 'revolts' conducted initially in the countries directly bordering on France, then in the more semi-peripheral countries culturally subordinate to England and Germany. In the twentieth century, Casanova's account implies, these literary revolts continued to erupt in the outermost peripheries of the Paris-centred world system, this time in the vast colonial territories beyond Europe that had been subjected, however unevenly, by way of European imperialism to European linguistic, intellectual and literary domination. The most radical literary experiments in the twentieth-century postcolonial peripheries, those of the Latin American Boom being an exemplary instance for Casanova, are thus taken to be fundamentally continuous in tendency with the earlier revolutions of the French against the universalism of Latin, of the English and Germans against French cultural hegemony, and of the Irish or Norwegian cultural struggles against English or German supremacy.[11] As new European centres vie with old ones, and as new national literatures across Europe and other continents struggle with more prestigious neighbouring literatures for recognition, the mimetic logic of the world system remains the same and the reach of that system is increased, not diminished, by such relentless competition.

Immensely suggestive though it is for the study of the formation of national literatures generally and for the analysis of modernism more particularly, *The World Republic of Letters* suffers in my view from a number of conceptual restrictions that I hope to avoid in this study.[12] To begin with, for instance, Casanova's work stresses the significance of literary peripheries to modern literary innovation and linguistic experiment and thus to the continuous renovation of world literature. Whereas writers and intellectuals situated in core metropolitan zones like France and England tend generally by virtue of their exalted position, she argues, to take the literary norms and privileges enforced by that system for granted, their counterparts in the peripheries are by necessity much more anxiously

or cannily conscious of the hierarchical nature of the world of letters. Thanks to their lower place in that system's hierarchy, they have every reason to be more sensitively attuned to the unspoken rules of the game, to its mechanisms of consecration and to the prevailing conceptions of literary backwardness or modernity that it sustains. Because they know their own national literatures are deemed to be unsophisticated, many writers from the peripheries have always elected to adapt their literary production as best they can to metropolitan norms. For this reason, many have migrated to the core capitals of the world system in search of standards or literary recognition and rewards not available in their own more destitute nations. However, not everyone is equally content to adapt ambitions to the rule of the centre. Other writers from the peripheries have been provoked by similar circumstances to challenge the normative values enforced by the core literary powers and have struggled mightily to add to the value of their own national literatures. In Casanova's view, these peripheral areas tend to be sites of restive (and mimetically resentful) literary activity in which both emulation of and rebellious challenges to metropolitan norms are recurrent systemically determined reflexes and stimuli to literary production. An anxious sense of literary backwardness, and a consequent desire on the part of writers either to assimilate the styles and values of the centre or else to challenge and repudiate that centre in some way, are, in Casanova's work, defining features of a literary periphery. Even so, these anxieties are what make the peripheries sites of intensely lively activity despite their relative lack of prestige, and that occasionally even make them the sites where revolutionary upheavals that will alter the existing system begin.

Nevertheless, despite her sense that French cultural dominance in Europe has a history and her welcome stress on the restive or rebellious creativity of the peripheries, there is something troublingly static in Casanova's overall conception. For one thing, the centre of her system, Paris, appears to be extraordinarily fixed and stable. It dominates from the seventeenth century to the 1960s, when its dominance, Casanova allows, though even then she hesitates, may have finally begun to wane. For Casanova, revolts in marginal zones against metropolitan capitals are literary events of consequence; these revolts bring new national literatures, new literary movements and great works of literature into being. Yet because for her everything that happens in the system's margins has to be recognized, processed and canonized first in the centre, the ultimate effect of all this peripheral literary revolt is that the world literary system is spatially expanded but continues nonetheless to be centripetally dominated by Paris and, to a lesser extent, London. Thus, more