

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Mihaylov Igov

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on the PhD dissertation in the field of higher education 2. Humanities

by Kiril Romanov Hadzhikosev with the title

Center and Periphery in British and American Modernism: James Joyce, Jean Rhys, Thomas Wolfe, Djuna Barnes

Kiril Romanov Hadzhikosev was born in 1992 and graduated with a BA in English Philology in 2016 and an MA in 2020. He was enrolled in a full-time PhD program in 2021 under the supervision of prof. Madeleine Danova and presented his completed dissertation in 2025. He has gained professional experience as an English teacher, and in November 2024 he won a position as an assistant professor in the Department of English and American Studies at Sofia University. Since then we have been working together in the teaching team of the course "English Literature from Modernism to Postmodernism" taught to first-year students.

All the additional materials have been duly provided and meet the relevant criteria. The following review will sideline technicalities and focus on the dissertation itself, as it deserves specific and detailed attention.

Kiril Hadzhikosev's dissertation consists of an introduction, six chapters, conclusion, and bibliography. The text itself amounts to 132 pages, or 141 pages with references. It is an impressive work that undertakes an ambitious investigation into the concepts of center and periphery within British and American modernist literature, focusing specifically on four key authors: James Joyce, Jean Rhys, Djuna Barnes, and Thomas Wolfe. The study explores how specific texts by these writers engaged with the spatial, cultural, linguistic, and socio-political conditions of their time to interrogate and destabilize traditional dichotomies such as center-periphery and self-other. The dissertation is framed within a hybrid modernist/postmodernist perspective that sees modernism as both anticipating and laying the groundwork for postmodernist deconstruction of metaphysical and ideological certainties.

The author's theoretical premises, as outlined in the Introduction, are rooted in a dialectic that contrasts the cataphatic (positive, presence-oriented) and apophatic (negative, absence-oriented) approaches to knowledge and being. Hadzhikosev contends that modernist literature embodies a negotiation between these approaches, generating a polyvalent space where difference is internalized and deterritorialized rather than merely excluded or reified. The dissertation aims to trace how modernist texts complicate the notion of a stable center by revealing its internal fractures and by positioning the periphery not as a mere marginal other but as an active, transformative force.

In its combination of close textual analysis with philosophical inquiry, the study applies concepts from post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory, drawing on thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Žižek, and others. While such an interdisciplinary approach is worth undertaking, the dissertation would have certainly benefitted from discussing, even if briefly, academic research on the specific authors and texts, as well as studies approaching the problem of center and periphery in Modernist literature from a different angle (e. g. Joe Cleary's *Modernism, Empire, World Literature*, CUP, 2021). Indeed, a dissertation is generally expected to demonstrate an awareness of related previous research.

Chapter 1, *Center and Periphery in Modernism from a (Non-)Post-Modernist Perspective*, sets the groundwork by contrasting two approaches to the center-periphery dichotomy: a non-post-modernist (structuralist and geo-political) perspective that sees centers as dominant metropolitan or imperial powers and peripheries as colonies or marginalized spaces, and a post-modernist perspective that deconstructs these binaries by emphasizing decentralization, pluralism, and intertextuality. Hadzhikosev argues that modernist literature already anticipates post-modernist critiques by revealing the instability and multiplicity of centers and peripheries:

The center, as signifying an absolute, stable, unshifting epistemic and metaphysical ground... could not hold anymore. Virtually, it was seen as being dispersed throughout the full body of the socius according to different laws, logics, languages producing different appearances... (26).

In *Chapter 2: Politics of Space: The Modernist Artistic Condition*, the dissertation explores the epistemological and ontological implications of spatial organization in

modernism. The chapter elaborates on how modernist authors envisioned space not just as physical or geographical but as a socio-political and linguistic construct. The author introduces the apophatic and cataphatic modes of interrogation, emphasizing their interplay in modernist texts. The chapter underscores modernism's critical role in destabilizing binaries and fostering a multiplicity of voices and ontologies; overall, however, it is somewhat fragmented due to the wide range of complex issues it has engaged with.

Chapter 3 bears the rather long title *Deconstructing Conmee: Mediating between Center and Periphery through Operators, Bodies, and Excess in the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of James Joyce's Ulysses*. It offers a detailed case study of Father Conmee, a minor yet central figure in *Ulysses*. Hadzhikosev interprets Conmee not just as a complacent representative of Catholic power but as an operator within a larger semiotic and social machine that mediates between center and periphery. The chapter examines the interplay of multiple "bodies" — the father's body, the Catholic discourse, and the watch (time-machine) — as a machinic assemblage that produces and disseminates power. The analysis reveals how the totalizing power of empire and religion is haunted and undermined by its own excesses and internal contradictions.

Chapter 4, *Decentralizing Anna Morgan's Agency in Jean Rhys's Voyage in the Dark*, focuses on Anna Morgan's cultural displacement and her metaphysical status as other or peripheral within the imperial metropolis of London. Her bodily experience, especially relating to pregnancy and abortion, is explored as a site of ontological and political conflict. The fetus is interpreted as a figure of radical alterity that challenges the phallogocentric order's capacity to contain difference: "The body of the fetus exists beyond dichotomies such as center and periphery... but the body itself remains outside language" (82). Anna's tragic fate is read as a "metaphysical murder," a denial of agency and subjectivity that reflects broader colonial and gendered power structures.

Chapter 5, *Djuna Barnes Narrating the Peripheralized Body in Nightwood*, investigates Barnes's exploration of the female body, identity, and alterity. The body is both an object of social and symbolic inscription and a site of radical alterity that resists full codification. The analysis highlights Barnes's use of apophatic dialectics and narrative fragmentation to expose the limits of phallogocentric

discourse and to explore alternative modes of being. The chapter argues that Barnes's narrative strategy destabilizes normative categories of identity and power, making visible the tensions between presence and absence, center and periphery.

The final chapter, *Recuperating a Peripheralized Wolfe: Life-in-Death and The Power of Bad Writing*, offers a recuperation of Thomas Wolfe's work, sometimes dismissed for its "bad" or formless writing. Hadzhikosev reads Wolfe's romantic idealism and artistic vision as a performative gesture embodying hope for a future democracy and a new form of subjectivity beyond traditional binaries. Wolfe's perceived failures are thus reframed as the positive obverse of modernist experimentation.

It is right here that my two questions are situated, although I could have asked more. In your reading of Wolfe's 'bad' writing as a positive performative gesture, how do you reconcile this with modernist commitments to formal innovation and coherence in literature? Then again, you have focused on *Look Homeward, Angel* but you have not actually mentioned the different versions of the novel, which was extensively edited by Maxwell Perkins and much later restored and published in its "author's cut", with the title *O Lost*. Do you think that this might actually be relevant in your discussion of this novel?

The dissertation concludes that modernist literature fundamentally destabilizes the center-periphery dichotomy by revealing the internal contradictions and apophatic moments within it. The modernist project is shown to be a negotiation between presence and absence, identity and alterity, text and context, which anticipates postmodernist deconstruction. The study underscores the political and ethical dimensions of this negotiation, particularly in relation to marginalized bodies and voices, including colonial subjects and women. Ultimately, Hadzhikosev argues that modernism enacts a creative and critical rupture with inherited structures of power through its engagement with language, space, and subjectivity.

Hadzhikosev's deep insights and intricate interpretations make for an unusually ambitious dissertation, yet this also means it can be abstract at times and rather difficult to read, even for the trained academic. At the same time, the decision not to ground these interpretations in already existing literary research deprives the study of useful context. These flaws, however, do not measure to the

overwhelming positives of the dissertation: originality, ambition, theoretical sophistication, and analytical depth, not to mention fluid academic English of the highest standard. The dissertation meets all the requirements of academic research and contains significant contributions, so I confidently recommend the Honorable Jury to award Kiril Hadzhikosev the academic degree of Ph.D.

Sofia, 16.05.2025

Reviewer:

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