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Author: Shirley Bricout

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Joyce Wexler, *Violence without God: The Rhetorical Despair of Twentieth-Century Writers*.
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Reviewed by Shirley Bricout

Joyce Wexler's latest book is a welcome contribution to modernist, postmodernist, as well as postcolonial studies, in the way that it apprehends formal aesthetic shifts as responses to violence in a secular age.

Wexler's aim is to explore how a selection of prominent authors across borders, and from the late-nineteenth century onwards, coped with the ethical imperative to bear witness to unspeakable violence without claiming to impose meaning on specific events. Acknowledgements disclose that the six densely-written chapters and the epilogue are revised versions of previously published essays (including Wexler's essay in the collection *Great War Modernisms*, edited by Nanette Norris, also reviewed in this number of *JDHLS*). To bring them together, the study is framed by theories on belief put forward by philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007), in which he defines secularism not so much as the absence of religion but as the "absence of consensus of belief" (2). Literature therefore exposes the transition "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith ... is one human possibility among others" (Taylor qtd. Wexler 2).

The engaging introduction deftly surveys the sublime, Symbolism and Expressionism, among other aesthetic shifts, to contextualise the formal strategies which convey the indeterminacy of meaning on the backdrop of the proliferation of beliefs; for instance, Wexler draws on Ihab Hassan's idea that "postmodernism resembles the 'Kantian Sublime' in its awareness of the 'unpresentable', the 'unrepresentable'" (12). The introduction also discusses trauma studies which, although offering conflicting

approaches, posit the inexpressibility of violence in the victim, while historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that "the deficiency is in the audience not the initiate" (18). Harari's work on the rise of "Sensationism" in soldier's narratives, also qualified as "flesh-witnessing", sustains Wexler's point that "each person's inner experience was a distinct source of truth" (9).

The study's agenda is particularly well illustrated in the first chapter, where the structuralist understanding of realism as being metonymic and symbolism as metaphoric provides Wexler with an interesting cue to distinguish the layers of realistic depictions of the historical context from symbolic meaning which conveys colonial brutality in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The proliferation of meaning, of which Wexler traces many convincing instances in the novel, coalesces in the reflexivity of language when Marlow "makes the difficulty of describing and understanding his African journey part of his tale" (29). Engaging with dissenting views which dismiss modernist symbolism as an evasion of reality, Wexler explores Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's indictment of *Heart of Darkness* for being a racist text, as well as Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's plea to historicise the symbolic mode.

The study really gains momentum in chapter four with a stimulating confrontation between T. S. Eliot's appraisal of "the mythical method" in *Ulysses* by James Joyce (1922) and Franz Roh's 1925 analysis of the evolution towards magic realism – or New Objectivity – found in paintings contemporary with the novel. Useful black and white pictures of artworks support the argument, though Wexler does acknowledge in a footnote that some critics object to theories used in art history being stretched to literature (112). Then, thanks to micro-analyses of *Ulysses* and of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin (1929), Wexler delineates 'The German Route from *Ulysses* to Magic Realism', an apt title for chapter five. She dwells on biblical sightings in the novels to stress how they convey secular ideas, the "discordant discourses and disparities between tone and events prevent[ing] readers from construing any consistent authorial position" (125). She cleverly

traces a "line of influence" from *Ulysses* to postcolonial works such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) to underline how magic realism, which taps a local mythological belief system into the text, makes "the horror of historical events more incredible than magic" and fosters formal irony reminiscent of that of the mythical method (143). Finally, introducing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (1967) as a prime Latin American example, a welcome survey of what Alejo Carpentier called "lo real maravilloso" foregrounds how magic realist strategies helped cope with narrative aporia. However an unfortunate ambiguity arises in the summary of an article by García Márquez about the narration of violence in *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947). The phrasing – "Instead of describing the historical events of his own time, Camus examines the ambiguity of behavior in extreme circumstances long ago. The parallel between the two periods is implicit" (143) – reads as if events take place centuries before while the novel, which likens Nazism to a plague hitting a city where trains no longer run and inoculations are tested, opens with "The unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194– at Oran".[1]

Chapter six, devoted entirely to the Holocaust, convincingly tackles the ethical question: "Does a writer's lack of authentic experience invalidate an imagined narrative?" (18), by measuring individual accounts of the survivors, or "flesh-witnesses", against comprehensive, synoptic approaches. The combination of realism and antirealism in W. G Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and H. G. Adler's *Panorama* (1968) is cleverly shown to give way to resurgent materialism to comply with the duty of remembrance. Indeed, as in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), objects are granted agency all the more so since "matter is a better witness than people are" (166).

While being the most accomplished, these sections also reveal by contrast the weaknesses of the book. Assuredly in chapters two and three, filiations between European artistic movements and works by T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence gain new significance thanks to Wexler's focus on the rhetoric of violence. Engaging

parallels highlight how Symbolism and Expressionism fashioned Eliot's statements of "social angst" as well as "private anguish" (48); 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and other poems harbouring recurrent motifs such as catastrophe and martyrdom. But while the study dwells on Expressionist features of music and painting with references to Wassily Kandinsky among others, by comparison the attention given to the postwar work *The Waste Land* seems somewhat hasty. Like Eliot's, Lawrence's journeys to Germany are shown to have extensively influenced the aesthetic shifts from *The Rainbow* to *Women in Love* to which the study narrows down. Supporting the contention that "Lawrence did not repudiate symbolism but gave it a realistic foundation" (92), formal remarks based on examples of paroxysm and exaggeration sighted in *Women in Love* highlight the interesting proximity Wexler finds between laughter and violence in the scene set in the Tyrol where Ursula and her party meet a group of Germans. However the discussion does not tackle how Eliot and Lawrence endeavoured to reconcile their own profound religious beliefs with the secular age thanks to their modernist subversion of writing conventions. A reference to Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010) makes a general point about the modernists' quest for "the secular sacred" (7, n. 14), but just as biblical sightings are singled out in other literary works to pave the way for the treatment of magic realism, given the scope of the study it would have been relevant to apprehend Eliot and Lawrence's iconoclastic use of borrowings from the Bible and religious creeds as part of their narrative responses to violence.

The epilogue proves to be somewhat sketchy, despite its promising title 'The End of the Secular Age'. Wexler traces formal links between the poem 'When the Towers Fell' by Galway Kinnell (2002) and Eliot's *The Waste Land* to assert that, contrary to the authors discussed throughout the study, Kinnell "find[s] meaning in the violent events he names" when he overcomes artistic aporia by attributing causes to the 9/11 attacks (185). In the wake of communal loss, irony, Wexler states, gives way to sincerity only to

emerge again along with a new form of secularity fashioned by "the hardening of convictions" (187). This short conclusion would have gained from the examination of dissonant studies of post-9/11 literature; for instance it could have engaged with the view that Kinnell "stitches together lines from a range of texts in an enactment of *the difficulty* of speaking about the attacks".[2]

Despite these caveats, this thought-provoking and accessible study provides the reader with a complex picture of aesthetic shifts across borders since the advent of the secular age. By apprehending novels, poems and paintings as testimonies of violence, Wexler gives new insight into the challenges writers and artists faced to bear witness to their times.

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[1] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Vintage, 1991), 3.

[2] See Jeffrey Gray, 'Precocious Testimony: Poetry and the Uncommemorable', in *Literature after 9/11*, eds Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn (New York: Routledge, 2008), 261–84. The quote comes from the editors' 'Introduction', 4 (my emphasis).