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Violence Without God: The Rhetorical Despair of Twentieth-Century Writers

Joyce Wexler

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As twentieth-century writers confronted the political violence of their time, they were overcome by rhetorical despair. Unspeakable acts left writers speechless. They knew that the atrocities of the century had to be recorded, but how? A dead body does not explain itself, and the narrative of the suicide bomber is not the story of the child killed in the blast. In the past, communal beliefs had justified or condemned the most horrific acts, but the late nineteenth-century crisis of belief made it more difficult to come to terms with the meaning of violence.

In this major new study, Joyce Wexler argues that this situation produced an aesthetic dilemma that writers solved by inventing new forms. Although Symbolism, Expressionism, Modernism, Magic Realism, and Postmodernism have been criticized for turning away from public events, these forms allowed writers to represent violence without imposing a specific meaning on events or claiming to explain them. Wexler's investigation of the way we think and write about violence takes her across national and period boundaries and into the work of some of the greatest writers of the century, among them Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Alfred Döblin, Günter Grass, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, and W. G. Sebald.

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