

Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism?: Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence*. The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 1997, XXV + 157 pages, ISBN 1557284458.

This is a useful account of the effort of three very different “modernist” writers (Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence) to retain what Professor Joyce Wexler characterizes as the “Flaubertian” idealization of the artist’s quest for purity in a bourgeois society. How is a literary man or woman to come to terms with a heterogeneous public running from highbrow to low taste? The transformation of the literary marketplace created diversity of audience, rendering the artist’s task for public acceptance daunting. Indeed, the very fact of literary success signified compromise with vulgar and popular taste. Of course the great corrupter and tempter was popularity and economic reward. A mass audience was out there but it posed a serious threat to artistic integrity. Flaubert’s example, according to Wexler, taught an important lesson to the three authors of her study: one should be judged only by one’s peers. The key notion in place here was a recognition of professionalism – the revelation of literary talent through display of a high order of polish and technique. A combination of esthetic preoccupation with a willingness to take on topics which were offensive to a bourgeois audience was a mark of Flaubert and his literary heirs. Literature was to be valued for its own sake, not because it served a social function. Of course Wexler is aware that many of these ideas antedated Flaubert by at least a generation. One thinks of Gautier and even some of the Romantics.

According to Wexler, at the center of the dilemma of the three modernists was the need for earning a living while following the lofty path of estheticism and literary formalism. This difficulty was compounded by the stance of Joyce and Lawrence who, in the latter’s words, were eager to “throw bombs at the merchant pilgrims”. (Conrad’s case was more complex and the relationship to his readers more difficult to untangle.) Wexler delves into the strategies followed by the three to secure the publicity and patronage necessary for pursuing “art for art’s sake”. She is on target when emphasizing the passionate interest of modern-day audiences for details about author’s private lives, and in one way or another, the three provided the public with juicy morsels. One of the hallmarks of the modern scene is the obsession for literary gossip. One might suspect that many readers bought Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but few read beyond the first chapter. The same is probably true of almost all of Lawrence’s later writings. Of course the persecution of Lawrence and trial of Joyce’s *Ulysses* increased notoriety and income. Both were now celebrated as pornographers and their writings were to become collector’s items: first editions were avidly sought as they fulfilled Flaubert’s romantic model of the artist as martyr.

The growing professionalization of literary life was but one aspect of a late nineteenth-century European cultural transformation. In music, the visual arts, and in the museums and libraries housing the artifacts of this specialized culture, we observe that control is exercised by highly trained and technically proficient profes-

sionals. The influence of the general public in matters esthetic was on the decline in theater, the concert hall and the growing world of literature. Standards were now elevated and conformity to formal requirements was the order of the day. As the input of the general public in matters artistic was in declension, the artist felt free to follow a radically individualist path when interpreting modern life. Flaubert was a critic of bourgeois society and his targets were well defined and exquisitely detailed. Not so with Conrad, Joyce and Lawrence. They would dramatize an entire civilization in decay.

Wexler poses a vital question: How to make art pay without the author compromising integrity to sell his product? She cites to good purpose Milan Kundera's imaginary conversation between Goethe and Hemingway in order to illustrate the tenacious but irrelevant interest the public has in the lives of famous writers. After all, it is publicity, scandal, and the appetite for high and low-level gossip that sells books:

Goethe shrugged and said with some pride, "Perhaps our books are immortal, in a certain sense. Perhaps". He paused and then added softly, with great emphasis, "But we aren't".

"Quite the contrary", Hemingway protested bitterly. "Our books will probably soon stop being read. . . . But people will never stop prying into your life, down to the smallest details".

Kundera and Wexler are indeed on the mark; however, there is yet another dimension. Conrad, Joyce and Lawrence gave voice to a growing body of intellectuals defining themselves not in terms of the benefits received from society but, rather, in terms of their marginality – hence the evil role played by money!

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