The Midway Review publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Winter 2014 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult midwayreview.uchicago.edu.

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An approach to the Humanities that focuses on reflection and unmasking has us discovering what we are, rather than creating who we are.

The human drama is played out in the tension between striving and vulnerability.

Narratives do not replace ambiguities with certainties, but rather help us recognize them for what they are.

The term evil points to a dark aspect of our reality: that there is a boundary beyond which we lack control and moral authority.
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The Irony of the Humanities

The Humanities and the datafication of sentiment

Colin Bradley

Fritz Lang once made a four-and-a-half-hour-long silent film about an archvillain psychoanalyst named Dr. Mabuse who hopes to take over the world through sheer power of will. He’s skilled in hypnotism and, for some reason or other, uses this primarily to lull his gambling opponents into losing all of their money. One of his victims-to-be is the respectable collector Count Told. Invited to a party by Countess Told, Dr. Mabuse finds himself drawn into a bit of playful repartee by the Count. When the Count asks him his thoughts on expressionism, he replies: “Expressionism is just playing about. But—why not? Everything is ‘playing about!’” He then hypnotizes Count Told, forces him to cheat flagrantly in a game of cards, and runs off with the Countess.

I want to tell a similar story about the Humanities and Big Data, or statistically sophisticated methods of analysis. It’s simple: the Humanities are hypnotized by Big Data. They lose their freedom of will by mimicking Big Data’s methods, only to find themselves ruined, deprived of everything they once held dear. In this essay, I want to explain what exactly the Humanities have to fear from Big Data. My claim is not that Big Data is in any way evil or misguided. My interest is in pointing out that an approach to art and literature that concedes its peculiar provenance to these methods will lose something essential about what these endeavors are uniquely positioned to do: awaken us to the sensation of our own freedom and moral agency.
This debate is familiar to a current reader of The New Republic, which has devoted considerable attention to “Science vs. the Humanities.” Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist, cognitive scientist, and popular writer, suggests there that the sciences are producing results that would have delighted and dazzled many legendary champions of the Humanities: “Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Leibniz, Kant, Smith.” He is therefore baffled as to why humanists today are not so receptive to these developments, and as to why they continue to rally behind the refrain: the Humanities are to be discussed by Humanities folks only. “Though everyone endorses science when it can cure disease, monitor the environment, or bash political opponents,” he laments, “the intrusion of science into the territories of the humanities has been deeply resented.”

Leon Wieseltier, TNR’s literary editor, steps forward as ad hoc representative of the Humanities and Pinker’s chief interlocutor. In “What Big Data Will Never Explain,” he heroically attempts to stave off what he perceives as an encroachment by the sciences into strictly Humanities territory: “The mathematization of subjectivity will founder upon the resplendent fact that we are ambiguous beings. We frequently have mixed feelings, and are divided against ourselves.” Unfortunately, when he writes things like, “The other day I was listening to Mahler in my library. When I caught sight of the computer on the table, it looked small,” it is hard to get past his sense of superiority and see what he wants the Humanities to do.

The entire Pinker-Wieseltier debate is sterilized by its insistence that this be a debate between disciplines. I want to argue that it is actually a debate about how we represent the world and our place in it, and how we use this orientation to produce explanations of the myriad phenomena that make up our lives. Most standard interpretations of science would have it that science is responsible for outlining general laws that describe, impersonally, a given set of phenomena. Science explains phenomena by showing what must happen given certain conditions according to natural laws. And philosophy does this, too. Kant describes how the sensibility and the understanding, not to mention aesthetics and morality, work according to general laws. But he would protest vehemently—despite Pinker’s misreading—against informing these laws with empirical

evidence, with Big Data’s forays into the “datafication of sentiment” and “sentiment analysis,” as Wieseltier deems them. We cannot, Kant says, derive morality from observing life.

It is important to remember that the Humanities—especially visual art, poetry, and literature—also have the potential to utilize alternative methods of explanation that can represent the causes of phenomena as arising from an internal source and as instantiating moments of creation. They allow us to create for ourselves some of the phenomena that constitute human life, rather than merely discovering these phenomena in the external world. Therefore the Humanities must be careful, in reacting to the pressures of our current educational climate, to preserve and emphasize their privileged connection with this latter method of explanation. This will entail maintaining a guarded, but well-articulated skepticism towards the encroachment of Big Data’s methods, and also turning a critical eye toward some of the prevailing tendencies within the Humanities over the past century.

FREEDOM AND REPRESENTATION

There is a long tradition in philosophy that draws a direct connection between representation and freedom, and it is a concern for the latter that must steer the Humanities to rediscover its unique position in human intellectual pursuit and to rearticulate its mission accordingly.

Kant is among the thinkers most concerned with this problem. In The Critique of Pure Reason, he labors to work out the mechanisms underlying how we represent the world to ourselves, and to reconcile these abstract constraints on knowledge and representation with what he believes to be necessary elements of our practical and moral life. He recognizes the opposition between determinism and the freedom of the will, and claims that we desire to accept both, requiring determinism to construct general laws and freedom of will to construct a system of morality in which the individual agent is responsible. Constructing a system that allows us to accept these
opposing notions without falling into an obvious contradiction is, in a sense, what Kant’s critical philosophy is all about.

The nature of the relationship between freedom and representation is also the subject of Henri Bergson’s *Time and Free Will*. Bergson argues that all questions concerning free will arise from representing our internal experiences to ourselves in language made for communicating externally with others. While such (mis)representation is inevitable, we can only recover any notion of freedom through deep, careful introspection, into which we must not import any of the spatial concepts (including language and numerals) required for external communication. When asked to represent any inner experience, we are asked to peer inside the heterogeneous flow of purely qualitative inner sense and to represent it quantitatively, as something that can be represented. That translation is arbitrary and produces a degree of alienation from our free selves. In other words, not only do we swallow the necessary pill of concretizing our indescribable feelings in artificial terms such as “happy” or “confused” or the like, but we go one step further in confusing what we actually feel with what we associate with the word. Our attempt to externally represent these deeply personal inner states costs us our freedom of will: “we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we ‘are acted’ rather than act ourselves.”

Note that this problem arises regardless of whether we use words or numbers. As the young Hugo von Hofmannsthal reflected in a fictional letter he wrote for a Berlin newspaper in 1902, he could no longer write poetry because his words *always* failed to capture his intended meaning. The point of this discussion is not to provide any solutions to the problem of free will, but instead to emphasize the relationship between representation and free will, which the Humanities must bear strongly in mind when deciding which methods of representation and explanation should be utilized.
There is a different yet related way in which questions of representation factor hugely into the Humanities-Big Data debate: who has the right to speak for “us,” instead of simply for and as an individual?

Stanley Cavell, in his lectures published as *A Pitch of Philosophy*, is concerned with what he calls the “arrogation of voice”—the tendency of philosophers to use “we” in spite of the fact that they rarely if ever gather empirical evidence to make sure that they are speaking for a majority or even a plurality. He suggests that the justification for such a move lies in autobiography: “Then why do such philosophers say ‘we’ instead of ‘I’? With what justification?...And by whose authority? Their basis is autobiographical, but they evidently take what they do and say to be representative or exemplary of the human condition as such. In this way they interpret philosophy’s arrogance as the arrogation of the right to speak for us.” Though the implicit premise is that there is at least some degree of universality to the human condition, the ultimate appeal to authority is to autobiography, to the self, because we glimpse these universalities through our own act of meditation. The right to use “we,” then, is dependent upon a sufficiently nuanced and intimate understanding of “I.”

In Mark Edmundson’s much-discussed Harper’s article “Poetry Slam,” he presents a number of arguments that contemporary poetry is insignificant. In a response in *The Atlantic*, Joel Breuklander brings attention to Edmundson’s claim that poets no longer use “we” or “our”: “This, [Edmundson] writes, is evidence that poetry no longer deals in universal truths. A poet that doesn’t speak as everyone must not have anything big to say about the human condition.” He goes on to find all sorts of first-person plurals in the writings of under-represented writers whom Edmundson apparently ignores. There are several interesting issues here. However, I am most interested in pointing out that the right to use “we,” to claim to represent a wide swath of humanity, is intimately bound up with a sense of the robustness or relevance of a discipline—as both sides of the debate concede. While the scope of their claims may always be in question, thinkers in any discipline essentially strive to make inductive

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generalizations from their own personal cases. That is, they strive for the arrogation of voice, for the right to use “we.”

REALISM, LITERATURE, AND MERE REFLECTION

From this perspective, we begin to see the value in the specific kind of right to use the first-person plural that emerges through an engagement with an individual or autobiography. And this is somewhere the sciences cannot follow. This is the reason Socrates gives in the Phaedo, while awaiting his execution, for why he abandoned then-scientific explanations for the theory of the forms. Rejecting the teachings of Anaxagoras, he explains, “Whoever talks in that way is unable to make a distinction and to see that in reality a cause is one thing, and the thing without which the cause could never be a cause is quite another thing. And so it seems to me that most people, when they give the name of cause to the latter, are groping in the dark, as it were, and are giving it a name that does not belong to it.”

Socrates is pointing out the perennial problem plaguing attempts to distinguish correlation and causation: scientific laws are at best able to assign generally reliable correlations, but cannot provide a satisfying account of causation in any particular case, or for any particular “I.” This illustrates the limit of Big Data. The Stanford Literary Lab can analyze “Style At the Scale of the Sentence,” but this aggregate work is no substitute for disentangling an author’s particular choices.

In a world in which the standards of explanation are increasingly borrowed from the sciences—a deductive standard of explanation, which demands that the premises strictly and necessarily compel the conclusion—there exists a temptation to explain one’s actions as a
result of societal trends, external influences, and general laws. I love Netflix, vegetarianism, and public radio—but isn’t this all “stuff white people like”? Can’t most of my tastes be attributed to the fact that I’m an educated, middle-class, twenty-something white male living in a major city?

Nietzsche notices the consequences of this tendency while wondering how Spinoza’s ethical system, which denies free will for the sake of strict determinism, still accounts for morsus conscientiae, or the sting of bad conscience. As Robert Pippin puts Nietzsche’s conclusion, “it is a kind of regret that depends on my not really having had the option to do otherwise.”

In exposing the fatalism of determinism, Nietzsche alerts us that it is the sensation of conceiving alternate scenarios and actions and the realization of having had the option to act otherwise that constitutes the experience of freedom and of moral agency. If the Humanities exist to teach us about ourselves, they must do so in a way commensurate with the way we experience freedom and moral agency, as only humanistic discourse can.

The editors of n+1 recently took up this problem: how “to account for human freedom and also the determining power of the social world.” Part of their answer can be found in their Intellectual Situation, “World Lite,” where, to overcome the paucity of significance in the contemporary literary scene, they propose a new International movement in literature opposed to what they call “global literature,” which often amounts to little more than a pale shadow of global capitalism. The model for the International movement seems to have nostalgic roots in twentieth-century modernism—from Joyce and Kafka to Beckett—often fueled by longings for social revolution.

The Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács based his articulation of social realism on an ideology immured in the political maneuvers to survive Stalinism. Though Lukács was a vocal opponent of modernism (perhaps for political reasons), Adorno tells us in Aesthetic Theory that as a prisoner in Romania, Lukács finally realized that even Beckett and Kafka (not Joyce) were realists in his sense of the word. He sees realism as the only legitimate basis for literature: “If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that

reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface.”¹¹ There are two main claims here. The first is that art, by reflecting reality, can grasp reality “as it truly is”; in other words, art can disclose truth. The second claim is that the artist needs to have the right perspective in order to do this. In Lukács’s case, the artist must be Marxist and commit herself to exposing the contradictions of liberalism and capitalism. For the editors of n+1, the artist must fix her reflection of the underlying order from an “internationalist” as opposed to a “global” perspective—where “internationalist” is intended to recall the legacy of the First International.

These claims are worrisome for two reasons. The first has to do with truth. The so-called reflection theory of truth has a very long relationship with art. Ralph Waldo Emerson praises Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael for their ability to “resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing.”¹² In the Republic, Socrates criticizes the artist as one who is able only to mirror what is already a reflection (of the eternal forms), thus finding himself doubly and triply removed from the truth. But both claims—Emerson’s that the poet can reflect the world accurately and Plato’s that the artist cannot—are undercut by the as-yet unresolved problems plaguing such a reflection theory of truth. As Tom Rockmore explains: “There is simply no way to know that a representation correctly represents without knowing what it represents independently of any representation. Since there is no way to know this, there is no way to know that we know independent reality.”¹³ At least, we might add, not in any particular instance.

The second, more important reason, is that this task of showing reality as it really is, in a way that lays bare its rotten core by removing its epiphenomenal cloak, falls within the purview of scientific explanation. The familiar strategy, basically Marxist, received its best articulation from Karl Mannheim, who was the first to use the term enthüllung, usually translated as “unmasking.” Mannheim wrote:

In denying the truth of an idea, I still presuppose it as a ‘thesis’ and thus put myself upon the same theoretical (and nothing but theoretical) basis as the one on which the idea
is constituted...But when I do not even raise the question...whether what the idea asserts is true, but consider it merely in terms of the extra-theoretical function it serves, then, and only then, do I achieve an ‘unmasking’ which in fact represents no theoretical refutation but the destruction of the practical effectiveness of these ideas.  

This is indeed a familiar form of argument among leftist academics in the Humanities. It calls sharply to mind the strategies of artistic montage as advocated by Benjamin and Brecht, among others, as ways of exposing the contradictions of capitalist ideology by literally laying them side by side. It seems to be the basic method of every oppositional humanist who grew up in the tradition of twentieth-century critical theory, as epitomized by the ever-popular Slovene theorist Slavoj Žižek. If we take n+1 as somewhat representative of the current critical left, this approach is clearly still very much alive. It relies on the assumption that by identifying an illusory or contradictory structure as such, we rob it of its power to entrance us and command some sort of erotic attachment; once the structure is seen for what it is, the people will turn their backs in disgust! By now the political efficacy of such an idea should be thoroughly discredited by a mere glance at history and popular culture. Who, when pressed, is not aware of the contradictions that abound in our approaches to domestic security or climate change?

My point is not merely that the efficaciousness of the unmasking approach is empirically questionable. I am arguing that this should not be the defining model of critique within the Humanities. As explanations, methods of reflection and unmasking are constrained to reinforce the inexorable presence of an external structure and provide us with knowledge and understanding from without while neglecting the imporance of individual and social creation. It is true that critical approaches in the Humanities have successfully exploited these methods as a step toward positive social and political awareness and reform. Nonetheless, they derive from a method of deterministic, rather than autonomous, self-representation and are thus fundamentally scientific.

THE IRONY OF THE HUMANITIES

explanations. Assigning the Humanities to focus primarily on such a project today is to enlist them in the ranks of the very trends that currently threaten the vitality of their discourses. If the Humanities are to preserve a space of their own, they must look elsewhere.

IRONY AND TRANSCENDENCE

In *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear describes the uncanny ironic experience as a moment in which the familiar, namely ourselves, comes back to us as unfamiliar and thereby shakes us up. These are the rare moments in which we are capable of blasting through the norms in which we are typically enshrouded, and instead catch a glimpse of genuine alterity. “When irony hits its mark,” he explains, “the person who is its target has an uncanny experience that the demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which he takes himself to be already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings.” What is unique about ironic experience—as directly opposed to an unmasking—is the fact that it directs those whom it strikes outside what is given, outside what could ever present itself as the possible target of an unmasking, to something that cannot be reflected or unmasked, to something that cannot be represented because it simply is not, nor perhaps has ever been, present.

Lear works to excavate the notion of irony as understood by Kierkegaard in a paradigmatic ironic question: “In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?” Lear argues that Christianity (which beyond even capitalism is perhaps the “dreadful illusion” par excellence) in an ordinary sense contains within it space for reflection on the question of what it means to be a Christian. But, this ordinary reflection is an act within Christianity: “Christendom aims to be (and when it is vibrant it for the most part is) closed under reflection: for its inhabitants, reflection is possible, even encouraged, but is not itself
sufficient to get one outside it.”\textsuperscript{16} Reflection is possible, but all that one can see in the reflection is circumscribed within the limits of the system; only from the outside can one conceive of legitimate alternatives.

This shortcoming of reflection is not a problem peculiar to Christianity. It applies in any situation in which one’s own practical identity is the topic of investigation, or every mode of questioning that takes seriously Kierkegaard’s dictum that “to become human does not come that easily.” That is, it applies in the Humanities. Under the guise of reconnecting us with our free selves, an approach to the Humanities that focuses on reflection and unmasking merely reinforces the presence of a structure already imposed from without. It has us discovering what we are, rather than creating who we are.

Lear points to the peculiar human experience of feeling like one doesn’t quite fit into one’s own skin. It is in this excess, this unfitted part—which for Lear, a psychoanalyst, is an unconscious node of selfhood—that he suggests we are to look for the sources of transcendent irony. It is, therefore, an explanation grounded in the individual autobiography, yet one in which we are uniquely disposed to create new, universally applicable tropes and practical identities.

Perhaps we can call to mind the role played in the art and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by \textit{bohemia}, characterized by Thierry de Duve as “a literary and imaginary country where, in a deformed image at once tragic and ideal, there was dreamed a humanity to replace the real humankind that populated nineteenth-century Europe, and that industrial capitalism had pitilessly set against itself.”\textsuperscript{17} It is such a vision of a newly imagined world and mankind, a new bohemia, which irony can both encourage and preserve.

Marx himself provides a model for a depiction of reality underwritten by a longing for transcendence and re-imagination—indeed, for a realistic critique inspired by an imaginative conception of what could be. The legacy of Marxism is of course the critique of capitalism, which has provided a lens for unmasking analyses ever since. But, from the first instance, wasn’t Marx driven to provide

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 8.

this critique by a longing for a transcendent ideal: the realization of
the species-being? And isn't Marx's prose, even in the otherwise dry
Capital, profoundly ironic at its finest moments?

The Humanities must resist the temptation to seek to save
themselves by taking refuge in the Big Data turn of mind. The very
nature of explanation implicit in such an approach is at odds with
their spirit. Mere reflection of the social situation cannot alleviate
the burden of living in a world in which conceiving of alternative
scenarios has become an increasingly onerous task, and one is
more and more prone to the resignation of learning who one is
from without. The goal of the Humanities today should be to create
space for the ironic experiences Lear describes: experiences that
are intensely autobiographical, yet reach some connection with a
transcendent universal space of alternatives, allowing for a true
realization of freedom.
The Heart of the Political

An Interview with Martha Nussbaum

Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013
480 pp., $35.00

Joshua Trubowitz

Martha Nussbaum’s latest book, Political Emotions, is at its core about the limits and beauty of the human condition. Nussbaum sees the human conception as being at the heart of the political conception, and her book is an investigation of the individual’s engagement with the world beyond the self. Moving from our first anxious encounters with limitation to the violent segmentation of our societies, Nussbaum shows us that the realization of a just society depends on our reconceptualizing, and then loving, precisely what it means to be human.

Drawing on a broad range of work in political thought, animal behavioral science, and empirical psychology and psychoanalysis, Nussbaum sees the human condition as framed by striving and vulnerability. The human drama is played out in the tension between these two essential states. We strive for eudaimonistic aims—aims that we are emotionally attached to and that constitute our conception of a worthwhile life. The eudaimonistic emotions are directed toward things outside the self because they contain visions of the world’s being a certain way, and this makes them intrinsically political. But this means that our striving is necessarily accompanied by vulnerability: attaining eudaimonia is to some extent outside the control of our will because our happiness is contingent, in part, upon a certain desired vision of the world. External forces and chance—the death of a loved one, chronic sickness, or war—remind us that our
attainment of happiness is not simply dependent upon the force of our individual wills, that we face limitations.

The striving and vulnerability that frame the human condition are not fundamentally bad, but often manifest themselves as narcissism and anxiety. These states are so fundamental to our lives that Nussbaum borrows the Kantian phrase “radical evil” to describe them; they are radical in the sense that they arise directly from the striving and vulnerability that are the basic conditions of human life. Narcissism makes an individual see others as less than human, as slaves to the self, as objects rather than as ends in themselves. Anxiety is the product and state of “anthropodenial.” It is the reaction to a deep shame that is rooted in a rejection of all things of the “body,” all things that remind us of our mortality and vulnerability, and is the first principle of the desire to transcend the basic “animality” of our existence. Our anxiety projects itself into the fabrication of an ideal state of the “truly human,” an almost solipsistic state of transcendence, unity, and omnipotence.

This anxious yearning for the more than human manifests itself on the political level in the form of social hierarchies. The disgust that begins with a rejection of the body is transformed into a “projective disgust” for other groups of human beings that compartmentalizes the human world into the “truly human,” reserved for the self and those most similar to oneself, and the “utterly nonhuman,” reserved for “others.” Nussbaum argues that not only are these hierarchies unjust, they are not even constitutive of freedom for the dominant group. As the product of an aggressive reaction to a sense of helplessness, hierarchies reflect anxieties that are aggressively projected away from the self but in no way overcome. Even those at the top are left in a state of perpetual striving that they have only partially managed to conceal from themselves. Human beings remain in a state of horror at the “merely contingent,” and desire “an experience of transcendence and unity” that will not and cannot come because the world is not a reflection and representation of one’s singular will.
Eudaimonia, for Nussbaum, does come through striving, but not in striving for a state of “truly human” godliness. Instead, our very human limitations must be met with a spirit of loving affirmation. Only after we are pulled into a love of something beyond the self can we affirm our own vulnerability, finitude, and incompleteness. Love alone makes it possible to see others as ends in themselves and as possessing wills entirely independent of our own. Most importantly, love alone makes possible the recognition of and striving for a true happiness. Only in love can one desire a world that is not founded upon one’s own omnipotent will, but instead in which one desires to trust, to become dependent on another, and to enter into relationships of true reciprocity.

The experience of love for another human being brings recognition of the fundamental individuality of other people and, consequently, the irreducible heterogeneity of society. Individuality and heterogeneity are affirmed in love and no longer seen as obstacles to the just society. To recognize others as individuals and to affirm heterogeneity is to recognize that the world beyond oneself is not and should not be the projection of one’s own will. Perhaps counterintuitively, Nussbaum sees the affirmation of limitation as the only way to harmonize the striving and vulnerability that constitute the human condition. In the recognition of our incompleteness as solitary beings, we free ourselves to find happiness in relationships of loving reciprocity in romance, in the family, and in the society of individuals aspiring to an inclusive justice.

THE INTERVIEW

I want to ask about the relationship between beauty and anxiety in Political Emotions. Anxiety plays a major role, and it’s the root, or one half of the root, of what you call “radical evil,” which manifests itself in the formation of unjust social hierarchies, cruelty, and the compartmentalization of human society. But on the other hand, anxiety is the root of at least one image of beauty: the idea of unity, transcendence, overcoming limitation and contingency, overcoming the
incomplete, the imperfect. If in the aspiring society anxiety is either reduced or overcome, what happens to such images of beauty?

That’s a very interesting question, because it’s not one that I actually take up in the book, but of course it is there in a way. As you might guess, I’m not a huge fan of that idea of beauty as transcendence, and you see this in my chapter on The Marriage of Figaro, where at the end I talk about Charles Nussbaum, who happens to be my brother-in-law. He is a philosopher who writes about music who thinks that musical beauty is all about transcendence of the body and of human limitation, and I say that’s too simple. It might do well for some works, but works that interest me are actually works that help us come to terms, in a delighted way, with our human finitude. And so what I love about The Marriage of Figaro is the fact that it shows characters—and then I think promotes this in the audience as well—overcoming the anxiety of the finitude of the body. That’s a big theme in my work generally: that we’re in flight from our vulnerability and our humanity and that creates great trouble in society. And in this book I say that anxiety about the body is the root of a lot of bad stuff because we find that disgust toward minority groups, in my view, expresses the denial that we, the dominant group, are really finite and human.

The role that I see for the arts, or at least a big role for the arts in society, is to give pleasure and certainly beauty, but of a sort that brings us together and helps us overcome the anxiety of finite, bodily humanity. For example, in my little section on Millennium Park in Chicago, I say that it’s a wonderful example of a complex artwork that is funny, unifying, but, because of the way that it makes people recognize what’s comical and strange about the human body, is actually delightful, and we can celebrate it without thinking, “oh, now we want to be gods and we want to get rid of the body.” In short, I think it helps overcome racial anxieties, gender anxieties, and so on.

So I love your question, and I think you get right to the heart of a problem that’s always plagued me, namely, that a lot of appreciation of Western art is in the grip of a certain picture of
transcendence that I think of as pretty damaging at the end of
the day. Another place where I talk about this is in my book on
the emotions, *Upheavals of Thought*, where I have my last chapter
about Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and about the way that we need to turn
the ladder of love upside down, so to speak, coming back down
into our bodily humanity and being accustomed once again
to the smells of the body, the fluids of the body, and so on.
And what I really love about James Joyce is just that delighted
immersion in real human life. Now that doesn’t mean we
don’t want to transcend in a way. I once wrote a paper about
two types of transcendence. There’s one that I called “internal
transcendence,” and I think this book is really about that.
That is, trying to make the real world better, trying to aspire to
more justice, a more accurate treatment of people, and that’s
a kind of transcendence that’s real and that we can do without
lying to ourselves. But there’s another type that consists in
saying, “well, now we’re just going to forget about bodies,
we don’t really have bodies, and there are other people who
smell and who excrete and so on, but we’ll just subordinate
and marginalize them and then we can be happy that we’re the ones who have transcended.” That, I think, is a very pernicious tendency in virtually every society.

The example of Millennium Park is particularly interesting because it is right next to Grant Park, which you mention in your book as well as an example of that problematic vision of beauty as purity, transcendence, and hierarchic greatness. But Grant Park will still be there, so how should the citizen in the aspiring society be oriented toward these two fundamentally incompatible ideals of beauty?

It’s part of our history. It’s part of who we are. And so I guess keeping them there reminds us of some difficulties we had in our past. I mean, what do I think of those buildings over there [points across the Midway to the Harper towers]? I talk about our campus in the same way. I think those buildings expressed an aspiration to be outside of time, outside of the community, and we surround them with different buildings which express different values—with the Robie House, which expresses a love of the earth, and then the Booth building—which I think is a wonderful building—which has both the horizontal and the vertical. And so we’re saying, “yeah, we had that history, it’s
still there, but we now have a kind of wisdom about it and we can laugh at it.” I think the Palevsky dorms laugh at it, and that’s great, because it really did make people upset when they were first put in. We can also build it in to a structure like the new Booth building or the Logan arts center that alludes to it but transcends it in a good way toward greater inclusiveness and a greater embrace of the full city existence of this university. And so I don’t think you just have to tear everything up, but you contextualize it in a new way, the way this building [the Law School] does. I think this building, already in the late fifties, made everything different because now here’s something on the south side of the Midway that, you know, is beautiful, but it’s human, and its scale is human, and its whole design focuses on community and interaction. So I think that’s what you do with the old; you just put it in a different context and you create a commentary upon it.

Love finds in the unreal a beauty greater than the lofty ideal, as you say. Love has the power to transform the imperfect into the perfect, to make the incomplete, complete, to make what might not have seemed beautiful before, seem beautiful, and what might not have seemed harmonious or unified before, harmonious and unified. In some sense you begin the book by saying that we have to set our sights lower, that we have to embrace who we are, that we can’t aim at transcendence and unity, and that you’re not pretending that we’ve reached the promised land. And I think that that all makes sense, but the flipside seems like maybe instead of locating the promised land or the ideal beyond us or above us, you’ve found it in or among us.

That’s, again, very good. But I wouldn’t put it quite that way because I’d rather not use those same words: perfect, complete, harmonious. What I would rather say is, let’s just take the love of people: that if you want the perfect partner, and you spend your life looking for the perfect romantic partner, then you’re bound to be disappointed by the real person that you’re with and that is a real problem in human life. But if you come off of that for a minute and you look at the real person, then you find the real person. I would rather not say you find completeness or perfection, because I don’t think you find that. Instead you
find something that’s much more interesting, much more fun, and just much more real, in the real person in front of you, who is quirky and imperfect and not harmonious. And if you can do that, if you aren’t so hooked on the idea that “I’m going to keep looking until I find the one who’s perfect,” which means you’re never going to be happy at all, then you could really enjoy life and have a lot more real happiness. So that’s the way I would rather put your point. If you think about the Figaro chapter, what are they doing? None of them is finding something perfect, and this is what I emphasize in talking about the Countess. She’s a smart woman. She knows that her husband is imperfect, so when she goes on with that relationship, she does so in the embrace of something that is quite imperfect. But love embraces imperfection.

I just want to push back a little bit there. You say that the human condition is essentially limited, and part of our problem is that we think that the real part of us is beyond those limits and that if we could just get to it we would be whole and we would be complete. But it seems like if we affirm those limits and understand that there is nothing beyond them, then haven’t we become whole?

What we keep doing is trying to make things better. And there’s a way of doing that—what I’ve called inner transcendence—that doesn’t involve denial of the inner conditions. I don’t think we should say, “okay then, we’re all going to die at thirty-five. That’s the way it is, and don’t worry about research and healthcare.” I would like to live to be one hundred and fifty! Since my grandmother lived to be one hundred and four and she had a very happy life until then, well, I’d like to live longer than that! You know, if we say, “oh the human condition is this,” that’s a recipe for misery. And so maybe the urge to make things better, we should keep. And it’s a very tricky business to say when that flips over into becoming the view I oppose. Because there’s no essence to human life; the conditions are always changing, and they change in part because of our efforts, and so the minute we say we’re happy with the way things are, then that’s not so good. You know, would it not be human life if you lived to be three hundred and
The earth was strewed with brains, arms, and legs. 

fifty? I don’t know. Bernard Williams, my great teacher, wrote an article about this opera The Makropulos Case, the Janáček opera, where Alina Makropulos has been frozen at the age of forty-two and then it goes on for three hundred years and she gets tired of life; she doesn’t want to live any more. I think that’s a particular case, but I don’t think we’re all like that. I think we’d actually love it if we actually lived to be three hundred. There are resource problems, of course, but that’s a separate issue. So I think striking the right balance, between wanting human life to be better and wanting it not to be human, is a very delicate business.

But I think heroic efforts to make things better are great. I mean, look at the books that are on my desk: Gandhi, and Mandela, and so on is what I’m writing about now. I think we want a conversation about what it means to accept your humanity, what it means to try to make it better, and certainly I feel removing pain and suffering, removing poverty, is great. So, you know, Gandhi and Nehru had these exchanges where Gandhi would say, “simple village life is more pure,” and Nehru says, “there’s nothing good about being impoverished, about being poor, about not having enough to eat.” I’m on Nehru’s side. We should always try to make conditions better for people. And who’s to say it’s not human that we would have a society where everyone has enough to eat? That’s perfectly possible, and it hasn’t happened simply because of bad behavior. There’s tragic fatalism that says, “oh well, what can we do, human life is tragic,” and I don’t like that at all. I think you’re quite right to say that if we interpreted my idea of accepting humanity in that spirit, that would really not be very good. But maybe transcendence to some just means giving people enough to eat and giving them adequate healthcare. And if it’s that what they’re talking about, then I’m all for that.
What form does striving take in the aspiring society? In your book, the human condition is framed by striving and vulnerability, and I'm wondering whether the soul is harmonized in the aspiring society. You seem to say that the aspiring society allows for striving freely. It's not the striving that's the product of anxieties that can’t be resolved, but instead a striving that opens the possibility for a true freedom that had not been possible before and that is maybe the most important constituent of happiness.

I think that’s very good. I guess I think it’s always a difficult question, what forms of vulnerability are bad and should be addressed by a good society and what forms are bound up with things that are good. So, for example, having children be hungry seems to be a totally useless and bad form of vulnerability that we should just eliminate. But being vulnerable to disappointment in love is bound up with what love is and what makes love great. You can’t really have the kind of trust that makes love great without having the vulnerability that goes with that. You could eliminate that simply by not having love or by replacing it with some kind of willed friendship, but I don’t want to do that. I think it’s a big and ongoing question, always, what we really want to do to make life better.
The Stories We Tell Ourselves
Narrative identity and the fiction of Javier Marías

Michael Begun

At times in the evenings a face
Looks at us out of the depths of a mirror;
Art should be like that mirror
Which reveals to us our own face.
—Jorge Louis Borges, “Ars Poetica”

Reading a Javier Marías novel is like becoming part of a detective story whose mysteries are everyday and seemingly inconsequential bits of life: a stranger’s laughter, a turn of the eyes, a familiar but nameless face. Unlike detective stories, Marías’s novels usually leave these mysteries unresolved. Marías’s most recent novel, The Infatuations (2013), revolves around a bigger mystery: a violent death whose explanation ultimately remains unclear. The narrator, María Dolz, learns who is responsible but cannot tell if what happened was a homicide or an act of euthanasia. There is no proof to be had, no final word.

Marías’s previous work also traffics in ambiguity. The three-volume opus Your Face Tomorrow (2002, 2004, 2007) features a narrator named Jacques Deza who has a talent for reading people’s faces and gauging their potential actions. A shadowy British intelligence operation recruits Deza for his powers of interpretation and tasks him with discerning peoples’ intentions and the “probabilities in their veins.” What comes to haunt Deza’s professional and personal life is the problem of knowing today “your face tomorrow, the face

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that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing.”

Both novels demonstrate how our responses to certain ambiguities—the inconsistencies of our intentions, the contingencies of life-changing events, the impossibilities of knowing one’s face tomorrow—help us understand ourselves. Like Marías’s protagonists, we respond to them by constructing and sharing our own narratives. In responding through narratives, we attain distance from ourselves and closeness to others. We come to recognize ourselves and others as unique individuals both subject to our circumstances and capable of altering them.

**LITERARY THINKING**

While the popular reception of Marías’s fiction has been muted in North America, his novels consistently earn critical and popular acclaim in Europe, where his name is often floated for the Nobel Prize. Born in Madrid in 1951, Marías has written dozens of novels and translated extensively. While it seems natural to describe his fiction as philosophical, Marías says that his novels instead embody a form of literary thinking: “a way of thinking which takes place only in literature—the things you never think of or hit upon unless you are writing fiction. Unlike philosophical thinking, which demands an argument without logical flaws and contradictions, literary thinking allows you to contradict yourself.” According to Marías, literary thinking produces something more like recognition than knowledge. It challenges readers to notice inconsistencies and grasp their meanings within the larger story.

The act of writing itself is a process of discovery for Marías. When writing the thousand or so pages that constitute *Your Face Tomorrow*, for example, he relied on only a few pages of handwritten notes, starting with the first pages and barely revising them as the rest of the book came together. Literary thinking is the product of invention: “The verb to invent, or *inventar* in Spanish, comes from the Latin *invenire*, which means to discover, to find out. That is what I like to do in writing: find out what I am writing about as I write it. I decide on the spot. If I had decided the whole story from the start—how
many characters there will be, what will happen to them, etcetera—I probably wouldn’t write it.” This project of invention and discovery rubs off on Marías’s narrators. They often seem at pains to piece together the past—the Spanish Civil War in Your Face Tomorrow, the life of a dead man in The Infatuations—and unearth the ways it has shaped their lives.

Marías’s novels typically begin with the narrator describing a strange or vexing event that then becomes the story’s center of gravity. Near the beginning of The Infatuations, María Dolz reflects on her past encounters with the murdered man and his wife:

I used to delay slightly getting into work just so as to be able to spend a little time with that couple, and not just with him, you understand, but with them both, it was the sight of them together that calmed and contented me before my working day began. They became almost obligatory. No, that’s the wrong word for something that gives one pleasure and a sense of peace. Perhaps they became a superstition; but, no, that’s not it either...it was just that, without my daily sighting of them, I began work feeling rather lower in spirits or less optimistic, as if they provided me with a vision of an orderly or, if you prefer, harmonious world, or perhaps a tiny fragment of the world visible only to a very few...

Dolz struggles to get the words right, to explain exactly what the couple meant for her. Not satisfied with calling the couple “obligatory” or “a superstition,” she resorts to longer and more metaphorical descriptions. What Dolz initially calls a “sense of peace” soon gets rendered as “a vision of an orderly or, if you prefer, harmonious world.” But even these apparently more fitting descriptions remain provisional, a shortcoming underscored by Dolz’s repeated use of “perhaps” to qualify her words.

Passages like this pervade Javier Marías’s fiction; nearly every pause in dialogue or step forward in the plot prompts the narrator to reflect on the broader meaning of individual events. This preoccupation with interpreting people, actions, and events shows us how the act...
of accounting for our pasts, while utterly commonplace, is thornier than we usually recognize.

To negotiate the manifold possibilities of relating their pasts, Dolz and Deza attempt to analyze particular events, doubting and discarding their own interpretations when they do not seem faithful or do not cohere with the larger story. But since the meaning of the whole is not simply given, they must continually hazard guesses and validate them against their interpretations of particular characters and actions.

Marías’s narrators must negotiate the perspectives of other characters in arriving at their own interpretations of events. In The Infatuations, Dolz struggles to reconcile her view of things with the account offered by Díaz-Varela, the man she falls in love with and later learns is responsible for a violent death—that of a friend who was dying of cancer and supposedly asked him to take his life. While Dolz is infuriated with Díaz-Varela, she also feels compelled, out of love, to listen to him. But neither Dolz nor the reader can discern if Díaz-Varela’s story is fabricated, or genuine, or something in between.
While Deza’s job is to predict how people might act in the future, and Dolz’s chief concern is to understand a perplexing sequence of past events, their interpretive tasks are essentially the same: to find the reasons that motivate people to act. Perhaps this is what leads Deza to muse, “to guess at their probabilities, to predict their future behavior, it was almost like writing novels, or at least biographical sketches.” Writing novels involves conceiving of characters’ actions and reasons for acting, which is not so different from understanding why people (including ourselves) act the way they do.

**NARRATIVES AND NORMATIVITY**

Narration allows Marías’s protagonists to critically reflect on their actions and the circumstances that led to them. At one moment in *Your Face Tomorrow*, Deza reflects on a man’s irritable outburst, his own reaction, and what it says about his role among his colleagues:

> But I didn’t like the man’s second irritable outburst at all. It wasn’t that I felt affronted or bullied. Well, I did, but that didn’t matter, I was not what I was (‘I am not what I am,’ I would sometimes repeat to myself, ‘not entirely,’ I would think, ‘not exactly’)…when I accompanied Tupra [Deza’s boss], alone or with the others; in a sense, I simply played the role of subaltern or subordinate.7

Deza admits to feeling affronted and then tries to express why he is not his usual self when working with the intelligence unit. Later, the incongruity between Deza and his surroundings grows almost unbearable, as Tupra goes to shocking lengths to manage a tricky situation, threatening to kill someone and presenting Deza with a moral crisis. Deza later confronts him, “You can’t just go around beating people up, killing them.” To which Tupra responds, “Why, according to you, can’t one do that?” Deza is caught off guard, and has trouble formulating an answer. It is only later that he can more adequately grasp what he should have done and said.

This example, while extreme, helps bring out the ethical functions that narratives can perform. Narratives are not empirical explanations for how one event caused another, but explanations given in normative
terms. To use a distinction made by philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, narratives operate in the “logical space of reasons,” as opposed to the space of causes, which is the object of empirical investigation. For Sellars, the space of reasons is conceptually irreducible to the space of causes; to suppose otherwise is to make the central error of empiricism. His point is that an empirical account is not a story, but rather an enumeration of events connected by causes. We learn little about the people behind such events from an empirical point of view.

Instead we seek explanations of human action grounded in the intentional states of people—their desires, beliefs, and values. Such explanations enable an evaluative stance and are satisfying for us in a way that empirical explanations are not. While we may be able to entertain the suggestion that a person committed a crime or a relationship fell apart due to causes beyond anyone’s control, when all the chips are down we would still seek an explanation of these events grounded in peoples’ intentions. A strictly empirical explanation may help us understand why the events occurred, but it does not admit of the possibility of judging people and their actions. The possibility of adopting an evaluative stance is inherent in narratives, in which intentions are regarded not merely as causes of actions but as things that can be right or wrong. Narratives contain “practical wisdom” that organizes and evaluates the events recounted. Paul Ricoeur, reflecting on Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” writes:

The art of storytelling is the art of exchanging experiences; by experiences, [Benjamin] means not scientific observations but the popular exercise of practical wisdom. This wisdom never fails to include estimations, evaluations that fall under the teleological and deontological categories...in the exchange of experiences which the narrative performs, actions are always subject to approval or disapproval and agents to praise or blame.

Ricoeur’s contrast between scientific observations and practical wisdom hangs together with Sellars’s distinction between causes and reasons. By “practical wisdom,” Ricoeur has in mind something like Aristotelian phronesis, which involves reflection upon which ends we ought to pursue. Writing and sharing stories is a sort of ethical
exercise: in fashioning narratives we form tentative judgments of actions and characters. Ricoeur further suggests that evaluating what characters do and what befalls them is intrinsic to the meaning of the events recounted.

As exercises in practical wisdom, stories help us evaluate our own actions in light of knowledge we gain or values we adopt; I may regret tomorrow a past action that I have not regretted up until now. Provided that we regret some aspects of our prior selves, the possibility of evaluation introduces a gap between who we were and who we would like to be. Our own narratives express this gap, which is unavoidable and essential to our sense of identity. The activity of coming to know ourselves through narration is descriptive and normative; in writing our own stories we come to grasp what happened from one remove and thus what we ought to have done.

CONTINGENCY AND UNCERTAINTY

For all the uncertainty that weighs on Marías’s narrators in their attempts to interpret intentions and past events, readers are left with a sense of closure upon finishing these novels. This is not unlike the experience of wrapping up a chapter of our lives or productively reflecting on our pasts. In both cases we incorporate contingent events into our sense of self (or observe characters doing so), like the violent death in The Infatuations or an accidental collision on the sidewalk with a person who later becomes one’s spouse. Since these events can change us irreversibly, they demand that we account for how they have changed us, lest we be unknown to ourselves.

While we may hatch detailed plans for our future studies, career pursuits, or relationships, we know these intentions may be
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summarily disrupted by accidents or encounters. In Your Face Tomorrow, Deza plans to go back to his native Madrid but happens to be noticed by someone working for a British intelligence unit. In The Infatuations, Dolz is visiting the bereaved wife of the murdered man when Díaz-Varela (who was a good friend of the couple) happens to visit; and so begins Dolz’s infatuation with him. Unforeseeable developments threaten to disrupt our best-laid plans and undermine our sense of identity; they can throw us on our heels until we understand their impact on our lives.

The disruptive nature of unforeseeable events runs up against what Ricoeur calls our self-perspective as “a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others.” This self-perspective sees our identities as constituted not by our varied experiences, but rather by something fixed that underlies them. This is the source of the belief that we would still be the same people even if we had made very different choices or if other life-changing events had befallen us.

In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur suggests that the tension between these two perspectives—one in which our experiences determine our identities and another in which we remain the same people through time—creates the urgency to narrate. By narrating our own lives we come to grasp ourselves as in one way constituted by our particular experiences and yet in another way by our constant, internal selves. And a particular narrative, one of many possible interpretations of human actions and events, in a sense creates the resulting identity: “the contingency of the event contributes to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of the character. Thus chance is transmuted into fate...The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told.”

Ricoeur points out that the events of a narrative, which could have been different or nonexistent, take on an appearance of necessity when integrated into a story. Narratives provide a way of construing
those events as non-accidental or non-arbitrary to our sense of self. They help render our pasts intelligible by explaining and sometimes justifying why we hold the particular beliefs and intentions we do.

In The Infatuations, Dolz’s life would have been utterly different had she not happened to realize that the man she used to observe in the café was the same man whose name appeared in the newspaper reports of his murder. And the murder itself, as Dolz later finds out, was in many ways a matter of dumb chance. Life-changing events like this irreversibly alter our world and pose a threat to our current sense of self. Like Dolz, we try to incorporate them into narratives through which we grasp our own identities; otherwise the present circumstances in which we find ourselves may start to appear arbitrary or absurd when we take a step back. This is partly what makes Kafka’s stories like The Trial and The Metamorphosis so disorientating: an external power that remains alien to the character and readers alike determines the character’s fate.

Though our personal stories bear many ambiguities, the act of narration gives us “the experience, however incomplete, of what is meant by ending a course of action, a slice of life.”12 This is precisely what delivers a sense of closure to readers of Your Face Tomorrow and The Infatuations. In each case, we observe the narrator’s attempts to come to terms with an elusive past, which may or may not seem less elusive upon the completion of the story. The narrator has tried, to the limits of her capacities, to understand how this past grounds her identity, after which it becomes possible to turn the page as a changed yet identical person.

Were we not half mysteries to ourselves, and were we not equally baffling to others, there would be little need to write and exchange narratives. Ricoeur writes that it is “precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively.”13 While the act of narrating can give

12. Ibid., p. 162.
13. Ibid.
us stability regarding our pasts, as Marías’s fiction demonstrates, it does not replace these ambiguities with certainties, but rather helps us recognize them for what they are. We recognize that our lives could have gone otherwise, but that we would still in some sense be the same person; we realize that our past intentions may have been misplaced or that we did not live up to them; and we see how our lives are dependent on others whose actions we cannot foretell.

Narration helps us take a step back and evaluate our actions in relation to others, whose perspectives cannot be wholly known yet cannot be disregarded. Since the stories through which we come to know ourselves are linked to other people in ways we often regret, our own identities can often seem frightfully dependent on the decisions and desires of others. This might be cause for despair if it did not also contain, in Hannah Arendt’s words, “the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.”

Who Needs Evil?
A Review of Evil Men by James Dawes

Jon Catlin

In our culture, “evil” is a loaded word. With four letters, it simultaneously harkens back to theological dogma, global sufferings, and the villains of history, thus confronting us as indefinable in its complexity. And so we might ask, as James Dawes does in Evil Men, “Is the concept of evil itself useful?” Especially in the wake of the twentieth and young twenty-first century’s numerous genocides, evil has come to seem like an outdated, abstract, and mystifying term for the real, pressing dangers we must confront. Following Nietzsche, most scholars today are skeptics of evil, more interested in the significance of what we deem to be evil and why, rather than what might actually be evil. In any case, as Susan Neiman has argued, evil is such a prominent concept in the history of the West, and has engaged so many thinkers, that it can be read as “the guiding force of modern thought.”

Roughly equating Kant’s notion of “radical evil” with the Holocaust, Hannah Arendt wrote: “All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.” Evil today designates a sphere of action not necessarily supernatural but decidedly beyond any ordinary, empirical explanation. The term points to a dark aspect of our reality: that there is a boundary beyond which we lack control and moral authority. And just as we cannot undo evil, we cannot unthink the way knowledge of it, say of 9/11 or of Sandy Hook, has affected the way we view our world.

WHO NEEDS EVIL?

In Evil Men, Dawes, an English professor and director of the Human Rights Program at Macalester College, undertakes a multifaceted investigation of evil in which he attempts to demystify the concept into secular terms for the present world. The book is ostensibly an analysis of what evil looks like up close. It brings together dozens of interviews the author conducted with Japanese perpetrators of genocide in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), including the so-called Rape of Nanking, in which more than 300,000 Chinese civilians were raped, tortured, and murdered. But, more accurately, it is one man’s struggle for an answer to a question we inevitably pose to the evil men of history: why did they do it? While prompted by face-to-face encounters, Dawes seeks answers from the Western traditions of philosophy, literature, and psychology, linking a particular moral catastrophe with a problem that is timeless and universal.

THE INTERVIEWS

Dawes’s men hardly waver in their terminology. “I think I was evil,” one of them says in an interview. “I think the things we did were really evil.” Despite scholars’ hesitance about the term, evil still holds weight for the men, moral certainty. Dawes gets to the war criminals when they are in their eighties, frail and far removed from the proud young soldiers they were in the wartime photographs many showed him: “Looking at their younger selves, they told me they saw emptiness; they saw demons.” His aim is to embody that gaze, to discover the inner workings of atrocity.

Dawes’s project is motivated by several paradoxes: “We are morally obligated to represent trauma, but we are also morally obligated not to”; “Evil is demonic and other; it is also banal and common to us all”; “We are free and self-determining; we are also the products of circumstance.” We can only settle into these paradoxes by employing what the poet John Keats called “negative capability: the capacity to experience uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, and to remain open to them, to resist the impulse to reduce everything to
familiar terms and categories that we can control.”

From the beginning, Dawes is wary of this tendency in history—the temptation to unwittingly reformulate the past into familiar narratives and thus distort it. The fact that the men Dawes interviews are perpetrators, the “victors” of history, raises further questions: “How can they confess truthfully when memory is frail, self-protective, and self-serving, when history itself is tissued with lies?” Specifically, the men often fit their experiences of the war into narratives of self-pity: “I bore the burden of having to do these things.”

Dawes begins by asking the men the obvious questions, but ones that eventually prove unanswerable: “Why was I able to do those sorts of things? Even I don’t understand that…I’m a farming man after all, I thought—a man from a farming family. I thought that afterwards. That’s how you feel in the end, you know. Ah, I’m not a man who would do something like that.” These men committed terrible crimes, yet, in looking back on their lives from old age, clearly “experienced [their] own crimes as trauma.”

The men Dawes interviewed were formerly members of the Chukiren, a group of Japanese antiwar veterans that drew attention to their country’s war crimes and promoted friendship between Japan and China. After the war, the men experienced “something like a religious conversion” in Chinese prisons for war criminals, where they were educated and treated with respect. They renounced their crimes, their former selves, and especially their country. They “embraced blame, but only as part of a context that exceeded them”: they had the bad luck of reaching adulthood in an ultra-nationalistic Japan and were drafted into its army. Forty-five of the 1,100 men were indicted for war crimes. All were eventually freed without charges.

Some of the men offer apologies and seek atonement. Others tell their stories in hopes that that such crimes will never be repeated. But, as Dawes begins to observe, “there is always a remainder, something unshareable that endures.” Dawes notices that several men have trouble articulating their thoughts in the first place. In the words of Cathy Caruth, they experience their trauma primarily as “an assault on meaning rather than a kind of meaning.” Dawes recreates
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this difficulty by reproducing the interviews in literal translation from Japanese, complete with stumbles and pauses, and thus often disjointed phrasing.

BANALITY, CONDITIONING, CRUELTY

Coming to atrocity from the Western tradition, Dawes invokes Hannah Arendt’s portrait of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann as “the dominant image or model for helping us think about war criminals today.”

Arendt wrote in a series of articles in The New Yorker on Eichmann’s 1961 war crimes trial in Israel that he was, above all, thoughtless—in two senses of the term: “both unthinking of others but also incapable of thinking.” He had a certain “remoteness from reality” identifiable through his language: “he spoke in clichés, used stock phrases, seldom varied his words.” He simply “never realized what he was doing.” As Dawes puts this view, “This is what evil looks like. It is unimaginative, banal.”

Three months into the trial, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram, himself Jewish, began his famous experiments on obedience in order to put Eichmann’s repeated claims that he was “only obeying orders” from his “superiors” to the test. Did committing evil actually require malicious intent, as the prosecution seemed to believe, having relentlessly characterized Eichmann as a bloodthirsty anti-Semite? Or could evil action lack evil intention? Milgram devised an experiment in which one subject, deemed the “teacher,” was to administer electric shocks to a “learner” (in fact only a voice recording in the next room) whenever the latter incorrectly answered word-game questions, with the shocks increasing in magnitude for each mistake.

Before the experiment, a team of psychiatrists estimated that only one-tenth of one percent of the subjects would fully heed the experimenter’s chilling refrain: “the experiment requires that you continue.” Horrifically, sixty-two percent of subjects continued to deliver lethal shocks until the bitter end, despite the “learners’” cries of agony and punctuating silence. How did the experts get it so wrong? As Milgram illustrated, they vastly underestimated
the influence authority has on human action. They put faith in a conception of moral autonomy that proved illusory.

As Milgram mused on his findings, “One can only wonder what government, with its vastly greater authority and prestige, can command of its subjects.” Indeed, nearly all of Dawes’s men invoked the regime’s willingness to take responsibility for their actions, just as Milgram’s experimenter had for the teachers. They also cited codes of obedience: “Your platoon commander’s order was His Majesty the Emperor’s order...If you disobeyed an order on the battlefield, they said you got the death penalty.”

Dawes pushes these responses one step further: in many cases we actually desire “to surrender our responsibility for our choices to another, to escape what the existentialist Simone de Beauvoir calls the ‘anguish of freedom.’” He writes, “The mass violence is complex and perplexing, but in most cases it can be traced back to this simple moment, when a man...permitted himself to surrender his agency to another.” “Because I joined the army,” one of the men said, “I lost my humanity.”

From that moment on, Dawes finds a process of gradual conditioning at work, for example in the slaughtering of Chinese civilians in the name of surgical training for Japanese medics: “At first...I felt disgusting—I was timid. The second time...I felt just fine. Around the third time, I took the initiative and planned everything out. One time, completely by my own idea, I trained twenty men this way.” Asked how he felt at the time, the man answered, “It was a feeling like, ‘I did it!’ Yes. I was never really conscious of the wrongness of the fact that I was killing people.”

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish social theorist Dawes cites, suggests that modernity is “liquid.” The civilizing process has succeeded “in substituting artificial and flexible patterns for natural drives, and hence made possible a scale of inhumanity and destruction which had remained inconceivable as long as natural predispositions guided human action.” In line with Bauman, Dawes quotes Arendt scholar Richard Bernstein: “We may desperately want to believe that there is something about human beings that cannot be transformed,
something deep about the self, the voice of conscience or sense of responsibility that cannot be obliterated. But after totalitarianism, we can no longer hold onto these beliefs.” Most alarming, Dawes writes, is the suggestion that totalitarian conditions are not even necessary for such a transformation:

Take a group of poorly trained young people, put them in a strange and frightening environment, and give them unclear roles with light or no regulation. Each small hurtful act they commit in the course of making their confused way will make the next act seem more normal. Give them time, and they will eventually shed their moral identities. But not because they are inhuman. They will do it because they are human.

This understanding of evil as fundamentally and universally human has been the dominant one since Arendt. As a shift away from traditional theological explanations of evil, which attribute it to forces outside of us, this position is accompanied by tremendous anxiety. As Neiman writes, “The more responsibility for evil was left to the human, the less worthy the species seemed to take it on.”

Yet one can just as easily argue the contrary. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Robert McQuail has shown that, across time and cultures, only around fifteen to twenty men out of a hundred use their weapons at all during any given combat action. “The human resistance to killing other humans is so strong,” he writes, that “in many circumstances soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.”

One man recalled how he was trained to kill for the first time: by starting with Chinese civilians tied to trees. “We did not think our first time killing someone would be this scary of an experience. Everyone was trembling with fear. Trembling.” After missing with his bayonet, he says, “I couldn’t do it even once. And, most guys, everybody, they couldn’t stick them with their bayonets.” Cruelty, Dawes learned, must be conditioned. First, “you must methodically humiliate the victims until they seem like they deserve humiliation.” But such acts of cruelty “are not accidents or mistakes or things that somehow get out of hand. They are deliberate parts of the training process.”
As Dawes concludes, “To make people like this, regimes must exploit the normal human impulses to obedience and conformity—the very same impulses that can generate group altruism and morality—but instead orient them toward violence.” And this reorientation is easier than usual in the strange, foreign circumstances of war; “separated from all the reference groups we have grown to rely upon for moral judgment...there are no reality checks.”

**UNDERSTANDING EVIL**

Though it appears in many different forms throughout *Evil Men*, Dawes’s underlying question is whether evil is better analyzed and explained or left to its own, better left unique and narrow or universalized to us all.

Dawes is clearly ambivalent: “We must and we must not demonize [perpetrators]. We must not demonize them because to demonize is to accept a stance that shares features with the demonic: namely, a dismissal of the other’s full humanity.” Demonizing allegedly evil groups can easily devolve into hate—and what we might call evil in return. Moreover, viewing the men as “demons” not only precludes the possibility of their reconciliation; it also precludes prevention, for how does one educate a monster? A further risk: “If we allow ourselves to imagine that evil is somehow extraordinary, somehow beyond the human, then we can never identify and address the very ordinary situational and organizational features that regularly produce it.”

However, Dawes is also open to the opposing idea, that “when we lose our sense of the otherness of evil, we also lose our hate—and this is a loss...To reject is to clarify and solidify one’s sense of self and one’s moral commitment.” As Dawes acknowledges, the hatred evil calls out in us can, in a way, energize our sense of moral purpose.
“Nothing in our time has dramatized the risks of demystifying evil more furiously than the controversy surrounding Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ thesis,” Dawes writes. “The trouble with Eichmann,” in Arendt’s words, “was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly, terrifyingly normal.”

But “in helping us to understand Eichmann as somebody like us,” Dawes writes, voicing Arendt’s critics, “Arendt had taken something from us.” As Dawes words an objection made by Saul Bellow, “the effort to understand assaults on our moral world can feel like an assault on our moral world.” Dawes entertains these views—which, as he admits, are only feelings—too sympathetically. Arendt exhibited courage in denying us the comfort of moral refuge, however unsettling that may be. But Bellow was right that she took something thing from us: the fixed status of any one group as “the good guys.”

Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo demonstrated the stakes of Arendt’s argument in his famous 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which a group of students took up the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison in the basement of Stanford’s psychology building.
Mere hours into the experiment, the guards, intoxicated with their power, began subjecting prisoners to terrible conditions and making them perform humiliating acts. After just four days, Zimbardo shut down the experiment out of fear for the students’ safety.

As one guard reflected later, “I realized then that I was as much a prisoner as they were. I was just a reaction to their feelings…but we guards had the illusion of freedom. I realized later that we were all slaves to something in this environment.” Zimbardo showed, in Dawes’s words, that “we are more likely to engage in reckless behavior when we enter a state of ‘deindividuation’—that is, a state in which a person loses sense of herself as a separate individual.”

Zimbardo concluded from the experiment that the prison situation alone was a sufficient condition to produce aberrant, anti-social behavior. That is an astonishing and disturbing conclusion. Milgram’s particular enemy was authoritarianism, so as long as we empowered individuals, there was hope for retaining moral control. But Zimbardo radically expanded our understanding as to which conditions foster evil, such that they could be anywhere, and are still present today. He thus identified the potential for evil in each of us. As Dawes puts it, “you’re not so much who you are as where you are.”

**EVIL AND INTENTION**

One man reports having felt stripped of autonomy, “like a robot or a slave.” “The individual personality was completely killed,” he said, such that the soldier became “a person without ideas—without thoughts—that your body would do in a flash what you’re told…the body trained by this recruit training would simply jump over one’s reason—and then you commit the crime.” The man’s choice of words is remarkable: one’s obedient body jumping over the constraints of one’s reason. Such powerful psychological, near-physiological conditioning raises major problems for any conception of ethics that assumes a significant degree of freedom of choice.

Since Kant and his notion of “radical evil,” philosophers have largely agreed that an act must be the product of a conscious decision in order to be morally evaluated. As Neiman puts it: “Modern evil
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is the product of will." Though we tend to assume this today, it is quite a development in the history of ideas. Just think of Plato, for whom wrong could only occur if one lacked knowledge of what was right; one could not intend to do evil. Kant held that evil could not be accounted for merely by an innate predisposition like original sin (as Rousseau held) or the idea that a benevolent God had willed it so (as Leibniz held). Kant is clear: “the human being alone is its author.”

But who is to say whether the Japanese men freely willed their actions? Could they have conceivably done otherwise? In most cases, we cannot say. One of the men had actually studied Kant’s ethics before the war. He claimed that he and the other educated men tried to resist but eventually gave in. “If you really thought seriously about the contradictions of daily life, you would have a nervous breakdown.” As Jewish thinker Gillian Rose described the breakdown of Kantian ethics: in modernity “it is possible to mean well, to be caring and kind, loving one’s neighbor as oneself, yet to be complicit in the corruption and violence of social institutions.” As Dawes quotes Arendt, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.”

A Chinese instructor tells the men that the Chinese people understand that the Japanese were forced into their positions by their state, but nevertheless hold them accountable: “You were the hand; you all did these things.” Similarly for Arendt, despite its banality, Eichmann’s evil was still evil. “Even if eighty million Germans had done as you did,” she wrote, “this would not have been an excuse for you.” Her moral conclusion does not waver. Arendt ends her book abruptly, addressing Eichmann: “You must hang.” And he ultimately does, convicted of crimes against the Jewish people.

The way forward, the instructor tells the men, is to confess their crimes in writing, and most of them did. In the process of communal confession, one man realizes from another’s testimony that the blood samples he routinely extracted from Chinese civilians who had died of bacterial infections were in fact used to infect others in so-called germ warfare (which he had initially denied involvement in). The man’s confession seems sincere: “Forgive me. I learned that I too was used in germ warfare. Please forgive me,” he wrote.
What are we to make of this passive construction, being “used”? The man did not possess the very concept of germ warfare. He had no idea what the consequences of his actions were; he simply passed the blood along to the next cog in the system. This testimony typifies the moral ambiguity Dawes encountered in each interview. Sitting before a man who did not understand what he was doing, who had no intention of committing evil, how could Dawes call him an evil man? Knowing what that man had done, how could he not?

THE ETHICS OF NARRATIVE, OR, WALKING ON EGGSHELS

The above are some of the most important questions about human life that we can ask, and Evil Men rightly brings them to the fore. But somewhere in the course of the book they are abandoned, as Dawes gets stuck in the webs of what I’ll call the ethics of narrative.

Unlike the bold thinkers he cites—Arendt and Bauman, Milgram and Zimbardo—Dawes is afraid to make a statement, to lay down even so much as a definition of evil, much less a moral conclusion on it. It almost comes off as scholarly resignation: “I began to believe that the work of collecting perpetrator testimony requires moral myopia, perhaps even arrogance. To me, there seemed to be no other way to make it through the thicket of questions the work poses.”

Evils like the ones Dawes recorded call for intellectual courage. In particular, the idea of serving as a witness to the Chukirens’ experiences is especially compelling, for the subject of Japanese war crimes is still suppressed in Japan and omitted from state-approved textbooks. The pacifist veterans hold a minority view of history, so spreading their message would help to voice an unpopular truth.

But Dawes isn’t so sure of this. He comes to think that that emotional investment in traumatic narratives hogs our sympathy from real people by making us feel morally off the hook, such that “the feeling of suffering becomes more important than actions against suffering.”

Dawes also worries that, once represented, “atrocity gets turned
into something else, something lesser.” But such hesitation about representing trauma has its critics, notably Dominick LaCapra, who “warns that the impulse toward ‘sacrilization’ is also an impulse toward ‘silent awe.’” Rather, LaCapra suggests a process of “working through the past,” which permits genuine inquiry into history without allowing that one can escape the past’s constraints.

Dawes begins to think of the men as performers, eager to talk in order “to make comprehensible stories out of their incomprehensible evils.” He further worries that recording the perpetrators’ confessions may be construed as “a silent promise of forgiveness, a forgiveness you have no right to bestow or deny.”

But Dawes’s actual encounters with the men are so genuinely positive that it’s hard for these theoretical constraints to hold him back. “I must confess that I found myself liking these sweet old men,” he admits. He acknowledges his cliché impression of one ninety-year-old man: “I was surprised he was so normal, so harmless.”

We experience Dawes’s interactions as diary entries from his trip to Japan: “Now I am a tourist at a shrine, now I am asking a dying man to tell me how he learned to torture...I don’t understand how to put these things next to each other.” Dawes tackled this overwhelming deluge of the personal “in the way most professors process new things: I controlled it by trying to make it scholarly.” But he always fails at some level. He goes so far as to question the very idea of his book: “What does it mean for me to tell you these stories, and for you to listen to them?” In other words, why read about evil men and their crimes in the first place? Is it really to better understand genocide and prevent future crimes, or is part of it not also morbid fascination? Attention to such questions marks the book as self-aware, but it barely begins to answer them. It looks but does not touch; it is history walking on eggshells.
And Dawes admits to as much. At a talk he gave on his project, a friend of his “teased me afterward, saying I spent almost all my time apologizing for what I was doing...And then, in what approached neurotic comedy, I spent time apologizing for apologizing.” In its sensitivity to the ethical pitfalls of narrative, Evil Men falls short of an answer to its initial question of the importance of the concept of evil and what we should do with it. Luckily, one is waiting in its epigraph.

HERBERT, LEVINAS, AND HISTORY

Teachers in our high schools pound it into us that “historia” is “magistra vitae.” But when history crashed down upon us in all its brutal glory, I understood, in the very real glow of the flames above my home city, that she was a strange teacher. She gave to the people who consciously survived her, and to all who followed her, more material for thought than all the old chronicles put together. A dense and dark material. It will require the work of many consciences to shed light upon it.

— Zbigniew Herbert, “Why the Classics?”

Though Dawes never discusses Evil Men’s epigraph, it says a great deal about his work’s scope, intention, and acknowledged limitations. One of the great Polish writers of the twentieth century, Zbigniew Herbert fled his native Lwów, Poland as the Soviets invaded in the spring of 1944, for Kraków, where he studied philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. I spent this past summer studying Polish history and literature at Herbert’s alma mater, and came to see that the Polish literary mentality is absolutely suffused with history. To give you a sense of the horror Poles of Herbert’s generation lived through, nearly one in five people living in Poland in 1939 were dead by the end of the war, and half the population was displaced. This was on top of nearly two hundred years of foreign occupation, leading the historian Norman Davies to dub Poland “God’s Playground.” All literature is influenced in some way by its author’s particular history, but in Polish literature, history moves the author’s pen.

In teaching me this history, my Polish professors did not want me to feel sadness, or glean packaged lessons, or make analyses that would allow me to rest assured on socio-political explanations of
what happened and what is to come. They wanted me to engage with history as such, and to understand how quickly it overwhelms and slows down moral judgment, thus stalling the cheap, hasty moral conclusions Americans are taught in seventh-grade history.

In “Why the Classics?” Herbert condemned the despair, apathy, and guilt that preoccupied so many authors of his generation who had lived through Europe’s brutal twentieth century: “We cannot allow ourselves to stop believing that we can capture this world in words, that we can even be fair to it.” He goes on: “I don’t turn to history to gain from it a facile lesson of hope, I do it to confront my experience with that of others, to win for myself something I would like to call universal pity, and also responsibility, a feeling of responsibility for the condition of people’s consciences.”

Though Dawes achieves these by his book’s end, he is unable to recognize them as the fruits of an ethical overcoming of history in the way that Herbert, given his past, has. We want to know why our history is so marred by atrocity, and where that puts us. But, in Herbert’s words, making sense of that “dense and dark material” requires not analytical work, but the work of many “consciences.”

Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian-born Jewish philosopher who lived out the war and the Holocaust in prisoner-of-war camps in France and Germany, wrote in his essay, “The Meaning of History”: “Crimes are paid for in history, but one is wrong to expect justice from history...The great moments in history offer no criteria to judgment. They are judged.” To understand the meaning of history is to be struck by its illogic and realize that it bears within it none of the requisite tools for moral judgment. In considering history, we must always supply these judgments from without.

Levinas is arguing here against the Hegelian notion of dialectical progress in history, which equates history with truth and justifies individual suffering as a means to the fulfilment of history’s end. What Hegel calls the “Absolute Spirit of history” grasps and sublates all objects before it, including the evils of history, into useful, redeeming knowledge. History can thus be mastered, undone, and forgotten. “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”


In contrast to this totalizing system, Levinas writes in his essay “Useless Suffering” that “suffering is...rejection itself: a backwards consciousness, ‘operating’ not as ‘grasp’ but as ‘revulsion.’” In refusing the dialectical justification of suffering, Levinas makes way for an encounter with history that preserves each suffering’s particular wounds and records its scars. He concludes that non-useless suffering is suffering oneself for another’s suffering, “which is no longer suffering ‘for nothing’ and straightaway has a meaning.”

Whether brought on by the destruction of one’s hometown, as in Herbert’s case, or compelled by curiosity, as in mine, we must apply our consciences to history despite the fact that, or perhaps even because we know all along that we will not prevail over it—that amidst its dense, dark layers there is no code waiting to be cracked. In approaching history as Herbert does, knowing our small, impossible role in shedding light upon it, we are granted the ethical freedom to immerse ourselves in it—to trace its questions all the way back to their origins and work out its implications for our own lives. Only after working through the suffering history contains do we find ourselves in a position to reject history’s totalizing, self-justifying logic.

Emotional and confused, Dawes’s personal confrontation with atrocity proves too overwhelming to fit such a framework. By the end of the book, we are still unsure of what is at stake for us in these particular atrocities, and the domain of evil remains uncharted territory. What distinguishes Dawes from the great thinkers he quotes is that the latter, precisely in response to the disturbing conclusions of their work, mustered the courage to resist despair in the moments when it counted most. As Herbert writes, “Just as irony is not the same thing as cynicism... so that which seems pessimistic may be a muffled call for goodness, a call to open our consciences, to increase goodness.”


12. Herbert, p. 163.
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And in narrativizing suffering there is hope for Levinasian empathy. While studies show that people presented with information dissonant with their current understanding tend to reject it, Dawes notes that “stories, by contrast, can short-circuit the mechanisms of cognitive consistency and make us have experiences, make us interiorize rather than simply consider the identities of others.”

In her writings on the Eichmann trial, Arendt relays the case of Propst Grüber, a German clergyman who during the war neglected to attempt to dissuade Eichmann from his crimes. Grüber justified his behavior: “deeds are more effective than words.” But Arendt insists that “it had perhaps been the duty of a clergymen to test the ‘uselessness of words.’” Arendt’s challenge, that of protesting one’s history in the making, is one the world demands of us. Used against forces of evil, she concluded, “‘mere words’ would have been deeds.”
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