

'Atrocity' Then, 'Genocide' Now

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Review of: Bruce Robbins, *Atrocity: A Literary History* (Stanford University Press, 2025), 294 pp. (hardcover). GBP 27.99. ISBN: 9781503640559

In *Atrocity: A Literary History*, Bruce Robbins traces the evolving concept of 'atrocity' in literary and historical discourse, from its pre-modern roots to its modern moral and aesthetic framings. He examines how atrocity has been represented – whether condemned, neutralised, or even glorified – and how its depiction oscillates between melodrama and understatement. Robbins's inquiry not only reconsiders the role of style in shaping our understanding of violence but also questions whether the incidence of violence has meaningfully changed over time. Ultimately, his exploration of 'atrocity' offers a critical provocation to Genocide Studies inviting scholars to revisit core assumptions: the genealogy and political utility of the term 'genocide' since its coinage in 1944; prevailing theories of perpetrator motivation; the role of dehumanisation and ethnocentrism; the ethics of assigning blame; and the credibility of prevention discourse. In unsettling long-held certainties, Robbins opens space for long-overdue debate.

Today, the word 'atrocity' conveys moral outrage at the killing of noncombatants and the broader normalisation of violence, including acts like plunder. Robbins turns his attention to historical and literary portrayals of atrocity that function as forms of national self-indictment – narratives in which violence is condemned from within. In modern contexts, such self-reflexive critiques have become more direct and timely – except, Robbins notes, in the case of the United States. American responses to events like the Allied bombing of German cities during World War II or the 1968 My Lai massacre have been notably restrained. More broadly, Western powers have often deflected responsibility through what he says critics call 'vulgar self-congratulation' (p. 13) – celebrating their supposed restraint and civilising missions while overlooking the violence embedded in colonial and imperial histories.

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Robbins notes that while the term 'atrocities' began circulating earlier, it gained particular traction in the nineteenth century, acquiring a distinct moral charge (p. 30). The discomfort surrounding the word – its implicit moral indictment – meant its usage became cautious until the twentieth century. Today, 'atrocities' serves as a capacious, and often strategically employed, placeholder: in Genocide Studies, scholars use it to gesture at extreme violence while sidestepping the political volatility of more specific terms. Chief among these is 'genocide' – a word heavily freighted with legal, moral, and emotional weight. Its overuse has been widely critiqued; its underuse, perhaps even more so.

Legally, the definition of genocide under the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide ('Genocide Convention') is notoriously narrow. International legal scholar William Schabas has argued that, by its strict terms, only three events in history qualify: the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the genocide in Bosnia (specifically, the Srebrenica massacre). This conservative stance jars with the broader scholarly consensus, more generous in its understanding of what constitutes genocide, which places the number closer to thirty or forty. That said, Schabas's view also underscores the constrictive framework of the Genocide Convention, and with it, the urgent call for definitional reform.

This tension is playing out once again in real time. The international legal community is currently divided over whether the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7, 2023, constitute genocide – and likewise, whether Israel's retaliatory campaign in Gaza and other parts of Palestine meets the same threshold. Political allegiance and legal interpretation divide opinion, but outside these silos, the term 'genocide' circulates with ease. For many, it captures the moral horror of the moment in ways that 'war crimes' or 'crimes against humanity' – despite carrying equivalent legal penalties – do not. Manifestos by writers, activists, and other contenders have openly condemned either party for the crime of genocide. In other words, the symbolic power of the term outweighs its juridical function. This, too, echoes Robbins's claim: that 'atrocities' once held such rhetorical gravitas before its decline in moral and political resonance.

The limitations of the Genocide Convention were already apparent in earlier cases. This came up especially in the context of proving that a people or race (in Greek, 'genos') had been targeted by those in power. The rulings by the International Criminal Tribunal (ICTR) and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)

on genocide involved interpretative manoeuvres, demonstrating how legal institutions stretch the existing framework to meet political and symbolic expectations. The goal of these tribunals was, after all, not only to punish but to promote accountability and reconciliation. In other words, to fail on a (legal) technicality is to risk forfeiting legitimacy altogether. A pressing question, then, is whether the time has come for Genocide Studies scholars and legal practitioners to establish clearer, more accessible mechanisms for recognising genocide – rather than exhausting resources through protracted legal and political manoeuvring.

Critical Legal Theorists have long warned that law is never neutral.¹ It absorbs the political desires, fears, and aspirations of those who interpret and enforce it. Based on the selective decisions of powerful nations to condemn perpetrators or a perpetrator-nation with the charge of genocide, it is clear that Genocide law, more than any other legal domain, bears the imprint of such entanglements. Robbins's literary genealogy of atrocity reminds us that our terms for violence are not merely descriptive but constitutive: they shape what counts as suffering, whose suffering matters, and which histories are told – or erased.

An observation between the emergence of the term 'atrocity' and, later, 'genocide' is that a parallel evolution can be traced in the trajectories of 'atrocity' and 'genocide' – each term emerging in response to moral urgency, each bearing the weight of political and legal negotiation. Taken together, their histories suggest that we may be on the cusp of yet another lexical shift: the coining of a new term that captures the scale and specificity of contemporary violence, continuing the legacy of naming as an act of ethical reckoning.

Violence, Robbins also notes, was once seen less as an injustice than as misfortune – an outcome shaped by fate, faith, or failure in arms. Such a worldview, characteristic of premodern texts, rarely invited modern forms of indignation. Victim-centred narratives were scarce, not because atrocities did not occur, but because the status of victimhood itself had yet to be fully legitimised. Robbins attributes this silence, in part, to a fatalistic logic: had victims prayed to the right god, or fought better, their suffering might have been averted. This view undercut the moral authority of the victim and muted calls for justice.

Another reason for the amoral tone of many historical accounts, Robbins suggests, lies in the detachment of the chroniclers themselves. With time and distance, both historians and witnesses often forfeited

1 Frank Munger and Carroll Seron, 'Critical Legal Studies Versus Critical Legal Theory: A Comment on Method', *Law & Policy*, 6 (1984), pp. 257–97, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9930.1984.tb00326.x.

moral investment. Citing Walter Benn Michaels, Robbins engages with the argument that it is absurd to expect Americans today to apologise for atrocities committed against African Americans and Native Americans – because, as individuals, they no longer belong to the original communities of perpetrators. Similarly, historical narratives often subordinate the massacre of civilians to the spectacle of conquest. In the premodern context, Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great are remembered less for their brutality than for their imperial reach. By contrast, in the modern context, we tend to overlook Adolf Hitler’s territorial ambitions and focus instead on the catastrophic death toll (p. 196). Whether intentionally or not, Robbins here makes a case for timely reparations: moral reckoning, delayed too long, gets lost in the abstractions of history.²

Also particular about the modern era, Robbins says, is that the victim has gained a voice – fortified by human rights discourse and global infrastructures of visibility. Robbins does not explicitly address the second element, but his argument finds reinforcement in the emergence of international tribunals, the real-time witnessing enabled by social media, and the moral mobilisation of global civil society. These forces have helped shape a culture of accountability, where even low-level perpetrators may be condemned – as in Gacaca courts in Rwanda – and where atrocity is no longer viewed with detached curiosity but with outrage and ethical urgency. Still, Robbins cautions against simplistic narratives of causality. His refusal to impose clear moral lessons – however tempting – stems from a recognition that such conclusions may hinder deeper inquiry. He warns against the dangerous complacency of post-facto explanations: the tendency to ‘make sense’ of the unthinkable only after the fact.

This ambivalence runs through Robbins’s own reckoning with family history. He confronts the role his father played as a pilot and squadron commander in the Allied bombing of Halberstadt in 1945. What begins as an abstract inquiry into national self-indictment becomes a personal reckoning: from pride to discomfort, from heroism to complicity. Robbins asks how easily he might have filled his father’s role – and how that identification might have foreclosed his moral clarity. In this, Robbins touches on a core theme: that memory, like history, is refracted through personal, political, and temporal lenses.

2 Sabah Carrim and Luis Gonzalez-Aponte, ‘Bruce Robbins: On Literature, Atrocity, and Academic Freedom’, *Not to Forgive, But to Understand*, 28 July 2025 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1leTj9AGo8&t=11s>> [accessed 10 October 2025].

Perpetrators and victims alike are often trapped in an irresolvable dispute over who bears 'original' blame. Robbins underscores how political fashion, ideological loyalty, or inherited allegiance shape these positions. He recalls George Orwell's dismay over Western indifference to the 1942 Nazi massacre in Lidice, Czechoslovakia – evidence that atrocity, far from guaranteeing a humanitarian response, often fails to transcend partisan lines. Robbins also observes that writers from African states have been notably prolific in articulating national self-critique (p. xiii). While he offers no theory for the contrast with other regions, one might interpret this as a form of moral or virtue signaling – a response to a long history of narratives framing Africa as inherently violent or irredeemably barbaric.

Robbins's scepticism about causality echoes a deeper philosophical lineage. Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, critiques the human desire to locate a 'first cause' – a moral impulse masquerading as analytical rigor.³ Robbins, too, warns that our instinct to assign blame may offer emotional closure, but it often obscures the complexity of violence and its representation. The very shift in atrocity discourse – from the glorified neutrality of premodern texts to the moralism of the modern era – is not, for Robbins, a straight path, but a layered terrain of psychological need, political context, and aesthetic form.

Throughout the book, Robbins returns to the question of guilt – not simply as a personal emotion, but as a performance of moral authority. Drawing on thinkers like Ann V. Murphy and James Dawes, he explores how the outraged witness to atrocity may, paradoxically, occupy the position of power they claim to resist. Guilt, then, becomes less a reckoning than a ritual: a way to affirm one's own ethical standing, while preserving control over the moral narrative. It's a Nietzschean reversal – the moralising gesture as a new form of domination.

The notion that dehumanisation is a necessary precursor to genocide has long held sway in genocide studies. Iconic examples reinforce the assumption: the Jews cast as vermin by Nazi propaganda, the Tutsis denigrated as cockroaches in Rwanda. Yet, this paradigm has been increasingly contested. As an example, it is argued that perpetrators often *recognise* the humanity of their victims – and may even derive sadistic satisfaction from persecuting them precisely because they are human. Dehumanisation, in this view, is not a prerequisite but a rhetorical strategy, one among many.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1974).

Robbins echoes this scepticism. In his reading, atrocity does not require the erasure of the victim's humanity. He points to Julius Caesar's *The Gallic War*, where Caesar refrains from portraying the Gauls as subhuman. On the contrary, he humanises them by acknowledging their yearning for liberty. Likewise, in *The Jewish War*, Josephus avoids Orientalising the Jews despite their cultural otherness. For Robbins, these texts reveal that atrocity can coexist with recognition, even respect, for the victim's humanity.

Instead of focusing solely on ideological forms of othering, Robbins urges us to pay closer attention to the material motivations underlying violence – particularly plunder. 'Plunder', he writes, 'is older than capitalism'. It is not merely an outcome of conquest, but often its very engine. Robbins details how the promise of spoils – land, treasure, women – was central to the campaigns of Alexander the Great, whose soldiers were guaranteed riches in exchange for victory. This structured system of looting passed with little ethical scrutiny in its time, suggesting that what shocks modern sensibilities was once normalised practice.

Robbins connects this economic logic to broader shifts in the cultural perception of violence. The rise of secular nation-states gave rise to a language of condemnation – an ethos in which atrocity became morally legible. Prior to this, the looting of enemy territories was rarely treated as exceptional. The Vikings, often remembered for their brutality, are notably absent from Hayden White's *Metahistory* index, Robbins observes – an omission that reflects not their exceptionalism but the ubiquity of their behaviours in a time when pillage and sexual violence were routine components of warfare.

Even in more recent history, the moral valence of plunder has fluctuated. Robbins notes how the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust was accompanied by massive looting, as was centuries of colonial conquest. Yet, in the bombing of Halberstadt in 1945 – an event in which Robbins's own father participated – there was no looting: American B-17s flew in, razed the city, and returned. The violence was totalising, industrial, and impersonal. Robbins suggests that in modern warfare, plunder has become incidental rather than central. The economic motives persist, but they no longer structure the violence in the same direct way, and the rewards are spread through complex institutions.

This is not to say that dehumanisation has no place in the historical record. Robbins acknowledges its presence, citing Friedrich Schiller's *History of the Thirty Years' War*, where the destruction of Magdeburg in 1631 is blamed squarely on foreign invaders, whose otherness justifies

the horror. But the broader point stands: atrocity has never relied exclusively on dehumanisation. In many cases, it has flourished in full view of its victims' humanity.

Since the dehumanisation of the victim-group is perpetuated through the ethnocentric beliefs of the perpetrator group, it is important to find out what Robbins has to say about ethnocentrism. In *Genocide Studies*, ethnocentrism is a given in all cases of genocide. A few examples are the ethnocentrism of the Aryans during the Holocaust, the Han Chinese in the persecution of the Uyghur Muslims, ISIS in the atrocities against the Yazidis, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) in their extermination of the Rohingyas. Robbins, however, says no – ethnocentrism is not always a prerequisite in cases of 'atrocity', an expanded definition that includes but is not limited to genocide. Again, this suggests the narrow scope and application of the term.

Robbins argues that what unites premodern and modern literary and historical representations of atrocity is not the evolution of moral consciousness but a stylistic choice: the refusal of melodrama. Good writing, he insists, does not indulge in hyperbole, nor does it lean on easy moral binaries. Instead, it resists the impulse to present atrocity as a singular moral abyss that demands exclusive attention. Atrocity, no matter how extreme, does not explain all human suffering; to write as though it does is to distort both literature and history. Good writing is sober. It complicates blame. It recognises that the boundary between perpetrator and victim is not always so easily drawn.

This ethical subtlety is borne out in the historical record. Take, for instance, the Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz: Jewish prisoners forced to assist in the extermination of fellow Jews, many of whom were executed immediately after completing their tasks. They were both victims and – however unwillingly – participants in the machinery of genocide. Their position defies reductive moral frameworks, and yet their suffering is undeniable. Similarly, the dominant narrative of the 1994 Rwandan genocide – that of clear Hutu perpetrators and Tutsi victims – has been challenged by work such as Judi Rever's *In Praise of Blood*,⁴ which documents atrocities committed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the force that ostensibly ended the genocide.

These examples affirm Robbins's claim: that sober, thoughtful writing on atrocity refuses the seduction of easy blame. Literature and history must reckon with moral ambiguity not because it excuses

4 Judi Rever, *In Praise of Blood: The Crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front* (Vintage Canada, 2020).

wrongdoing, but because it reflects reality more faithfully. In practice, this complexity is often sacrificed in favor of coherence, justice, or political utility. Legal institutions, public memorials, and educational curricula may require simpler stories to sustain the imperative of accountability. But Robbins cautions us against letting those stories harden into dogma. To write well about atrocity is not only to record suffering – it is to resist the comfort of clarity.

Additionally, Robbins reminds us that the absence of indignation in literary and historical records does not mean mass slaughter did not occur. The point is well taken. Yet the inverse is just as plausible: the absence of recorded outrage does not necessarily mean such outrage was absent in lived experience. Literary silence is shaped by many forces – limited access to information, prevailing ideologies, authorial discretion, audience expectation, and the interpretive frame of the time. In eras of sparse documentation, especially, the lack of condemnation may reflect not moral indifference but structural constraint. As such, today's preference for stylistic restraint – especially in literary circles that valorise understatement – should not be mistaken by future analysts for ethical disengagement. Aesthetic quietude is not moral quietism.

This ambiguity echoes broader tensions in Genocide Studies, particularly around the plausibility and utility of prevention. Scholars and policymakers remain divided.⁵ One camp holds fast to the belief that intervention is possible at every stage – before, during, and after atrocity. Another, more sceptical view likens atrocity to weather: unpredictable, erratic, and resistant to intervention. This latter stance finds kinship with premodern accounts of violence, where destruction was understood less as aberration and more as recurrence – features of the political economy rather than cosmic punishment.⁶

In contemporary practice, atrocity prevention has proven elusive. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, once hailed as a watershed moment in international moral consensus, has faltered under the weight of geopolitics. Interventions have too often reflected strategic interest rather than humanitarian necessity. Syria, Yemen, and Sri Lanka were neglected, while Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, and South Sudan saw intervention – sometimes to mixed or disastrous ends.⁷ Early Warning Systems, both

5 Thomas Cushman, 'Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5 (2003), pp. 523–42, doi:10.1080/1462352032000149486.

6 Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Henry Holt, 1978).

7 Christopher Hobson, 'Responding to Failure: The Responsibility To Protect After Libya', *Millennium*, 44 (2016), pp. 433–54, doi:10.1177/0305829816640607

quantitative and qualitative, have likewise fallen short. The genocides in Bosnia (Srebrenica, 1995) and Rwanda (1994) were both preceded by ample warnings – ignored or mishandled by global institutions.

Robbins turns to *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things* by Matthew White⁸ to underscore the futility of seeking patterns in episodes of violence, including mass atrocity, and invariably, genocide. White catalogues atrocities without attempting to extract moral or causal coherence. The result is a brutal ledger of disconnected catastrophes – violence without narrative arc. In this, Robbins finds an implicit critique of theorists like Foucault and Steven Pinker, who have, in different ways, claimed that history reveals a trend – whether of increasing order or decreasing violence (p. 16). White offers no such reassurance. His refusal to force a pattern where none may exist casts doubt on the very enterprise of prevention – and is also a criticism of scholarly inquiries. If atrocity is not intelligible – if its eruptions follow no logic – then perhaps the scholarly emphasis on pre-emption requires rethinking.

Robbins's thesis – that the absence of moral indignation in literary accounts should not be equated with the absence of atrocity – is both timely and persuasive. Yet it also invites a further question: Could we be misreading the silence? Might the absence of indignation in literary history reflect not indifference, but censorship, aesthetic convention, or the limitations of genre and audience?

Texts are not transparent artifacts; they are shaped by authorial discretion, editorial filtering, and the social and political conditions of their time. This is especially true of premodern works, which may have muted or refracted moral outrage due to fear, form, or cultural norm. Even today, the literary fashion of avoiding overt moralising – encouraged in creative writing programs and literary circles – risks being mistaken for detachment. But restraint is not the same as apathy. A future reader assessing our era might misread this silence as complicity. That possibility should trouble us.

Robbins's intervention ultimately urges humility: humility in assigning blame, in reading silence, in simplifying history, and in imagining the future utility of our scholarship. The literary history of atrocity, as he presents it, is not a march toward moral clarity, but a record of our shifting discomforts – what we can bear to name, what we dare to condemn, and what we hope to forget. Good writing, in this light, does not console. It unsettles.

8 Matthew White, *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things: The Definitive Chronicle of History's 100 Worst Atrocities* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

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