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James Dawes, *Evil Men*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 263. ISBN 978-0-674-07265-7.

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Searching for the causes and meaning of the evil that men do, literature professor James Dawes (Macalester College) has conducted some useful and interesting interviews with perpetrators of horrific atrocities, primarily Japanese Army soldiers and other personnel, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). The topic is important and the moral imperatives that drive research into it are urgently relevant in our own day. Unfortunately, *Evil Men* amounts to an overly literary and overtly personal presentation of its author's pretentious musings.

The core problem is revealed on the first page of the preface: "The flow of the pages that follow simulates the visual flow of a photographer's searching zoom lens" (xi). Colored literary and cultural filters disclose the paradox that evil means that nothing ever really means anything, unless it also means everything. Or something like that: "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.... To find our meaning we must face our meaninglessness (xii-xiii). And so on through most of the 224 pages of this cloying, self-indulgent, narcissistic essay.

Theodore Sorensen-like rhetorical juxtapositions ("ask not ...") lend many passages a superficial profundity. Moral issues are always cast as paradoxes: "the paradox of trauma, the paradox of evil, the paradox of narcissism, and the paradox of writing" (28). Such language might seem to augur a subtle and perceptive investigation of "evil men." But the story that intrigues Dawes the most is his own: the great moral adventure of the enlightened professor encountering the darkling world and wrestling its demons to the floor of his college study, stabbing them with footnotes and grand allusions.

This leitmotif of the literature professor as world-changing moral hero is what Dawes calls part of a "deep history of human rights and the arts" (187). The book's oddly disordered narrative style is meant to reflect a conviction that literature changes the world more than activism, in particular, by advancing new conceptions of human rights. Thus, for example, the eighteenth-century epistolary novel nourished Enlightenment conceptions of human rights. *Evil Men* is not a study of atrocity or human rights in history at all, but an extended brief for the ethical purposes of poetry and literary fiction.

This may explain the author's evident belief that his personal reactions and reflections—and Prufrockian doings, down to menus of daring meals eaten after conversations with admitted perpetrators—will engage his readers as much as or more than the interviews themselves. Why try to fathom the motives of wartime rapists and murderers and those who carried out sadistic medical experiments and outright genocide, when "Human motivation in a deep sense is not only unknowable but also, quite possibly, unimportant. What matters is what these stories do" (209).

Dawes so intrudes himself in the most trivial ways into every interview and the far longer passages between them that the text reads like a parody of a *New Yorker* article: all fawning self-fascination, masquerading as a troubled, thoughtful, and cultured concern with the perplexing relativism of good and evil in the world. But let's stop for a side dish of one intellectual's cross-cultural and gastronomic experiences: "Each time, I hand the interviewee a small sachet of wild rice from Minnesota. Each time, I begin with awkward, repetitive half-bows, and the same joke.... In the morning, the photographer and I get coffee and pastries outside our hotel. In the evening, the interpreter takes us out for fun: to kabuki" (1). Also deemed worth recording is the author's impatience with his interpreter: "I try not to sound frustrated when I whisper ... *You can stop writing, please. Ask him what it felt like the first time.... I wait a full minute or two while she continues to write. Please stop writing ... I don't need the outline; we will translate it all later*" (15).

The editors at Harvard University Press inexplicably let pass the following unedifying sentences: “In the paragraph just above on censorship ... I wanted to talk about the My Lai massacre but wasn’t comfortable fitting it next to the Holocaust. Here’s what I wanted to say” (79). “My friend Barb read the previous section before publication and chided me for its despair.... Idealists shatter, I argue—realists trudge on. But Barb is making me rethink this. Around the time of her remarks, I was reading Terry Eagleton’s *On Evil*, which...” (112). And this *Vive moi!* moment: “Commenting on an early draft of the previous section, a friend scribbled a note in the margins to me: ‘You were in a dark place when you wrote this, Jim!’” (213).

Again and again, Dawes swerves into protracted, barely pertinent excursions on this novel or that poem, leaving the reader dearly wishing for an unadorned transcription of the interviews. Those who know anything about war, atrocity, and human rights in the twentieth century will cringe at the historical overreach of such grotesquely inapt comparisons as the following: “During the Iraq War ... [Adolf] Eichmann was the shadow behind Lynddie England, who tortured and abused prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad” (21). And how many historians would compare Abraham Lincoln’s limits on press freedoms with the repressive practices of Hideki Tōjō (76–77)?

Dawes repeatedly assures us that he has properly agonized over the ethics of hearing and repeating tales of brutality and murder. Yet, the irony of the following confession utterly escapes him: “In what approached neurotic comedy, I spent time apologizing for apologizing—because, it seemed to me, apologizing is a way of putting the self and its motivations at center stage, and it felt wrong to put my little internal dramas at center stage amid such epochal horrors.” A paragraph later, we read the truest words in the book: “The ‘I’ remains here in this book, as do the apologies—even if now they are disguised as analysis” (38).

The argumentation throughout follows a set pattern. First comes an assertion, usually drawn not from history, but from some literary or philosophical text, or, in one case, the hoary prisoner’s dilemma college psychology experiment. A typical example: “Many emphasize that the capacity for genocidal violence involves cultural training that starts young” (47). Next, a long filler summarizing some other book or article: “An emblematic story from a Japanese primary school textbook goes like this ...” (47). Only then do we get an anecdotally presented interview with one of the Japanese war criminals, sometimes accompanied by a partial transcript. Finally, Dawes veers into literary ramblings that may or may not shed light analytically or otherwise on the interview: “William Faulkner’s allegorical novel, *A Fable*, in which ...” (51). Then the whole potted melodrama repeats.

In discussing wartime rape, Dawes ignores excellent, relevant feminist and historical treatments of the subject in favor of a particularly trite strand of literary theory positing the essential predatory nature of men, citing only au courant academic studies that define rape as a matter of identity, of constructed images of masculinity, of formative and always distorting male relationships, of “competition and insecurity,” or, naturally, of perversely “idealized notions of heterosexual manhood” (94). Moreover, it is assumed rather than argued that it is *men* who do evil—the word “woman” does not even appear in the book’s index. Pop psychology is rife; thus, the campaign name “Desert Storm” is attributed to the “lingering doubts and anxieties [of a] hesitant president George H.W. Bush.... The idea of a storm was perfect. A storm chooses you; it is impossible to avoid” (75). Especially if “you” are a member of the Iraqi Army and the target of this calculated rhetorical threat.

Near the end of the book Dawes expands on the agonies of the self-aware, morally sensitive, and suffering writer through faux transcripts not of interviews conducted with admitted evil men, but of his portentous conversations with editors and colleagues: “Why are you telling their stories the way you are? Cutting the interviews up into pieces? Moving unpredictably back and forth between setting things in historical context and abstracting away from it? Why the continually shifting narrative voice and disciplinary perspectives?” (149). Good questions all. There follow three pages on the author’s mighty struggle with serious moral doubt over his provocative style of writing. Dawes concludes this self-examination with a revealing, if not quite Augustinian, confession: “I think I often shunned historical context because I simply couldn’t dare, as a U.S. citizen at this time, to launch a detailed and righteous critique of the war crimes of others” (151). Time for serious reflection on the moral error of false constructs of collective guilt, including one’s

own? No. Instead, we are served up a more fundamental excuse for avoiding history: “I believe that in all this there is something *more*, something beyond, something that truly cannot be explained in words but that, perhaps, we can begin to feel our way toward through the un-logic of decontextualized association and juxtaposition” (152).

Readers interested in military history or the atrocities of the Japanese in China will find little to engage them in these pages and will be unimpressed by their author’s sudden, *ex nihilo* conclusion that “Wars are made possible, sustained, and won or lost through deceit and the confusion of reference” (169). But then, Dawes has no use for outmoded, traditional ways of understanding the past. He is more preoccupied with therapy for writers, not actual human suffering experienced, say, on a Unit 731 vivisection slab. “Scholars today are developing a new kind of affect toward the real.... They seek less to touch the real than to recover from it.... The critical study of human rights ... allows therapeutic displacement. It allows one to experience self-preoccupation as an aspect of a purportedly universalizing institutional structure. It also allows one to perform one’s private anxieties and needs as an aspect of orientation to the other” (221). It is hard to imagine a less morally enlightened approach to the evil that men do than this solipsistic bit of performance art. I think I’ll just write another check to *Médecins Sans Frontières*. It’ll make me feel better.