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Monograph Winner: Bruce Robbins, *Atrocity: A Literary History* (Stanford University Press, 2025)

Bruce Robbins's magisterial *Atrocity: A Literary History* could have been subtitled—*A Proleptic Literary History*. Prolepsis—preconception, anticipation, foreseeing and forestalling objections is the figurative, rhetorical, and temporal lynchpin for this brilliant monograph. From the Homeric simile to Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* to Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ("Many years later, as he faced the firing squad...") (24) to Ishikawa Tatsuzo's *Soldiers Alive* to Alexander Kluge's *Air Raid* (the anecdotal springboard for this study when Robbins discovered that his father Captain Eugene Rabinowitz bombed Kluge's Halberstadt village on 8 April 1945) et. al., "prolepsis forces the witness of atrocity to occupy at least one spot in time when the atrocity is *not* occurring" (24). Prolepsis, in Robbins's deft analytic, "permits you to look away from the violence, thereby sparing your feelings. But in inviting you to look *away*, it also invites you to look *toward*- toward something of interest beyond the violence." (141) Such is in service of the book's larger project—"an experiment in cosmopolitan history" (xii)—mining and historicizing literary representations of atrocity. For Robbins, victimhood "has to be born" (xi) – Robbins denaturalizes the concept of victimhood and stages a pedagogic process, a training of sensibility that generates for mass violence against noncombatants a concept and a name. The current genocide in Gaza is forefront in this study. "Something had to happen in order for mass violence to be paired with outrage" (ix). Nietzsche's insistence on despising passive suffering is never that far away. Hegel's slaughter-bench history, Hershey, Kluge, Tolstoy, Márquez, Vonnegut, Sebald, Berger, Las Casas, Mitchell, Sok-Young et. al. are all mobilized towards this end. With a forensic-literary critical zeal, Robbins adeptly demonstrates the implications for thinking dialectically savvy theories of causality and explanation pertaining to how Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s borrows its formulation "There is no why" from Primo Levi's memoir of Auschwitz. He employs politically informed close readings of Orwell that avoid both reinscribing Orwell's dubious anti-communism and side-stepping his sincere socialist commitments. His work insists that "the force behind capitalism is force" (210). Robbins picks up from his commitments in *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* to think through the representational calculus of those "ordinary people"/workers excluded from regimes of surplus value extraction, when he reminds readers that as it relates to the transition from feudalism to capitalism "exploitation has never entirely superseded expropriation" (159). *Atrocity: A Literary History* contains a succinct formulation that captures the radical political importance of Robbins's entire *oeuvre*: Speaking about the aporias of possessing political rights (the move from "targets of expropriation to targets of exploitation") (68), Robbins offers the following assessment: "Although this is not a happy ending, it is a nonnegligible achievement" (68). Between these two poles, "not a happy ending" + a "nonnegligible achievement", Robbins models an interpretive ethic disciplined by actuality, refusing to mute projects for radical transformation. Such a stance resonates with a kind of pragmatic communism, an exacting calibration of the *what is/what ought to be* that re-imagines the dialectic of revolution and reform by way of close reading, sober worldly engagement, and a principled commitment to comparative literary studies. More important than its awesome critical triumph, Robbins's *Atrocity* is a masterful tool-book.