

## Moral Imagination: Essays

**David Bromwich**

Princeton University Press (April 2014)

Hardcover \$27.95 (376pp)

978-0-691-16141-9

*Bromwich delivers a probing and incisive collection of essays about culture, politics, imagination, and the war on terror.*

In the preface to his new collection of essays, David Bromwich states that *Moral Imagination* is “about works of the mind of various sorts, and the people who wrote or spoke them.” The historical figures he chooses as examples are prominent figures from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Bromwich, Sterling Professor of English at Yale University and a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*, is a scholar, first and foremost, and many of the initial pieces collected here are best suited for an academic audience. But beginning with essays like “The American Psychosis” and “The Self-Deception of Empire,” he engages in a more accessible examination of such contemporary topics as war, terrorism, and the blatant misuse of government power.

In the post-9/11 world, most attention has been given to acts of terrorism committed by religious fanatics, but in Bromwich’s view, this is far too narrow an outlook: “State terror, such as Britain practiced in Kenya, Russia in Chechnya, and the U.S. in Iraq—state terror, as exemplified by our own state among others—differs morally in no way from the terror of the people we are in the habit of calling terrorists.”

In an essay focusing on modern culture, “How Publicity Makes Us Real,” Bromwich elegantly dissects our national “mood of broadcast intimacy,” which compels ordinary citizens to flaunt their misbehavior before millions of viewers on network television. Such has become the perversion of relentless publicity and reality TV that “a person who resists the gaze of the mass culture, to the extent that he or she is the desired object of its gaze, will, for that sufficient reason, be classified as opaque, unreliable, even (in some hard-to-capture sense) potentially harmful to the normal people.” Citing examples like J. D. Salinger, the tortured characters in Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and Martin Scorsese’s film, *The King of Comedy*, Bromwich probes into the reasons behind our obsessive pursuit of the ephemeral spotlight of fame and what this pursuit says about who we are in the 21st century. The essay is startlingly prescient, given that it was written in 2001. Things, it seems, have only gotten worse with time.

*Moral Imagination* is an eloquent, demanding, and fiercely polemical work likely to appeal most to independent-minded readers and scholars alike.

LEE POLEVOI (Summer 2014)

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