

Moral Exhibitionism: The Hollow Virtue of Overreaction

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Act III of Shakespeare's "King Lear" painted by Benjamin West. Public Domain



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12/2/2024 Updated: 12/2/2024

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Commentary

Victory or defeat in democratic elections often provokes elation or misery, neither of which, for obvious reasons, is long lasting.

Politicians rarely stick to their promises, and even when they try to do so they are often thwarted by circumstances beyond their control or by the surreptitious resistance of bureaucracies. Moreover, even when promised policies are fulfilled, they may have unanticipated harmful consequences. The electorate soon forgets that it had any part in bringing them about.

But the recent victory of Donald Trump stimulated some of the most extraordinary reactions to an election victory that I have ever witnessed. Young people in particular took to the selfie video to express (very publicly) what they intended everyone to think was their despair, a despair that they expected would indicate their moral and political virtue. The extravagance with which they expressed themselves—weeping, wailing, writhing, or even throwing themselves to the ground—was likewise intended to indicate the very depth of their feeling to their audience.

If they had been sentenced to death for the following day, they could hardly have been more emotional, or at least more expressive of emotion, but most of that emotion struck me as bogus, or at least not straightforwardly sincere. It bore the same relation to true feeling as hysterical paralysis does to the physical kind.

Reading “King Lear” might have done them some good. In this play, King Lear, who is old and wants to retire from kingship, decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters. Before he does so, he asks them how and to what degree they love him. Two of them, Goneril and Regan, express their supposed love in the most extravagant terms, while Cordelia, the youngest, tells him simply that she loves him as a daughter ought. He is both offended by this apparent coolness and deceived by the extravagance of the other daughters’ expression of love for him. He therefore excludes Cordelia from the division of his kingdom, but Goneril and Regan quickly betray him. Lear realizes, but too late, that it is Cordelia who truly loves him.

The key lines of the play, at least for me, are those uttered by the king’s friend and adviser, the Earl of Kent, when he warns Lear, before his



disastrous decision to exclude Cordelia from the division of his kingdom, against his shallow assumption that real feeling is proportional to vehemence of expression. He says:

*Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness.*

To put it another way, empty vessels make the most noise, and to attend to empty vessels is to court disaster.

Where vehemence of expression is taken for depth of feeling, and people desire to show how deeply they feel, a kind of competition is established which has the logic of an arms race. If you beat the wall to show your despair, I will have to throw myself on the floor to demonstrate that I feel as much or more than you. And strength of feeling, of course, is believed to be a sign of depth and goodness of character.

This is preposterous and cannot but result in emotional dishonesty. When people take videos of themselves undergoing emotional crises, or even if they allow others to do so, especially when they are for publication, the crises of emotion become performances rather than true expression of feeling. The camera watches them, but they watch the camera. The same applies to expression in words as to video performance, so that violence of epithet is no guide to strength of feeling. If someone writes that Mr. Trump is a sympathizer with the Ku Klux Klan, this says more about the writer than about Mr. Trump—and in fact would be intended to do so.

Unfortunately, it does not follow from the fact that emotional expression is bogus or at least grossly exaggerated that it cannot have effects in the world other than purely psychological ones. There are reports that in Texas, for example, some young women are undergoing sterilization at their own request for fear that their so-called reproductive rights, including those to contraception and abortion, are about to be totally abrogated.

This seems a hysterical reaction to a hysterical fear. The idea that, immediately on taking office, the new administration is going to prohibit all forms of contraception is absurd. That the fear of pregnancy should be greater than fear of never being able to bear children at any time in the future seems almost to indicate a type of death wish, not for the individual, perhaps, but for the part of the human race to which the person belongs.

Another indication of political hysteria, or at least histrionics, is the now common replacement of the word *opposition* by *resistance*. The former is perfectly normal in a free constitutional state, and indeed is a precondition of the existence of such a state; the latter is what is required in a pure dictatorship that allows no discussion and punishes opinion. There is no reason to think that such a dictatorship is about to be instituted in America, and all of Mr. Trump's major policies are well within the compass of constitutional normality, whether or not they are wise, humane, or otherwise advisable. They will all be reversible once the opposition comes to power—as one day it will.

Of course, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, but the answer to little local quasi-dictatorships based upon political orthodoxies, such as have been established in many universities, is not the imposition of counter-orthodoxies, but rather the free play of ideas. One of the obstacles to that free play is the habit of exaggeration and moral exhibitionism of the kind that followed the election. Exaggeration results in counter-exaggeration, such that everyone has a civic duty to weigh his words.

This civic duty cannot be enforced by law: it is a habit of the heart rather than a legal requirement. Unfortunately, exhibitionism is more gratifying, and often more rewarding, at least in the short term, than decent restraint, never more so than in the age of social media. To reverb hollowness, to use Shakespeare's vocabulary, is fun. Among its other gratifications is that it reassures people with an inner vacuum that they have found a meaning after all.

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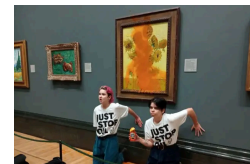
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Theodore Dalrymple is a retired doctor. He is contributing editor of the City Journal of New York and the author of 30 books, including “Life at the Bottom.” His latest book is “Embargo and Other Stories.”

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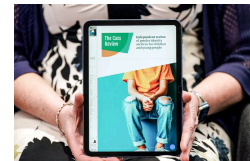
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