

Swear by It

By Theodore Dalrymple

These days, people of supposedly high caliber, or at least of high position, have difficulty in distinguishing vehemence of expression from depth of feeling, or even of thought. I may on occasion have made that mistake myself, since none of us is perfect, but it is my impression that what was once an occasional lapse has become almost a default setting of the mind—of others, of course.



Here I quote verbatim two tweets of someone in response to Mr. Trump's recent victory in the election:

I apologize to younger voters that my Gen X is so full of fucking fascists.

Solidarity to everybody whose meanest, dumbest, most bigoted school classmates are celebrating early results because fuck them to the moon and back.

Perhaps literary criticism of these outbursts is redundant, but one cannot help but wonder what the difference is between a fascist and a fucking fascist. This is similar to the question I used to pose to my patients who, when I worked as a doctor in a prison, complained of a fucking headache.

"Before we go any further," I would say, "can you explain to me the difference between a headache and a fucking headache?"

(In case there are pedants who read this magazine, I hasten to acknowledge that there is such a condition as coital headache, that is to say a headache that occurs during sexual activity, especially as excitement mounts, but this was not, I think, what the prisoners meant.)

"That's the way I talk," the prisoners would say.

"Yes," I would reply, "that is what I am complaining of."

As a verbal intensifier, *fucking* is so overused that it means practically nothing except in the mouths of middle-class intellectuals, to signify that they who employ it are of the people, the people being, implicitly, those of the lowest cultural level and therefore of the highest level of authenticity.

The semi-literacy of the second tweet is startling because it was written not by some uneducated drunk in a bar after a heavy night of inconsequential verbalizing, but by the editor in chief of the *Scientific American*, which justifiably prides itself on being the oldest continuously published journal in America and is—or was once—of a very high standard. The editor has a doctorate in neuroscience, and is presumably capable of expressing herself more circumspectly, as well as more accurately. "Fuck them to the moon and back" is what Polonius called "an ill phrase, a vile phrase," not only aesthetically but in sentiment.

Do people actually *think* in such terms, in the solitude of their own minds? If the answer is in the affirmative, I feel sorry for them: They must live perpetually in a kind of mental sewer. But if the answer (as seems to me more likely in this case) is in the negative, one may wonder by what process of reasoning, or at least of mentation, the writer of these lines saw fit to send them out into the world—where, incidentally, they have been read by at least 1,200,000 people, more than 2 percent of whom went to the not-very-great trouble of

expressing their approval of them.

The fact that the author of the lines was a woman might be significant (I don't claim it as more than a possibility). Perhaps she wanted to free herself of the convention that women are expected to be more genteel than men, a convention that some feminists, no doubt, believe was intended to keep women subordinate to men, verbal coarseness being the royal road to power (and power being the ultimate, or perhaps only, good in life). Thus, the ability to sound like a construction worker swearing at a broken tool was a proof of final liberation from the shackles of gentility.

But such supposedly virtuous vulgarity is not confined to feminist intellectuals trying to prove that they are really no different in their tastes or way of being from hard-hatted construction workers. People who are trying to escape the terrible shame of belonging to a social class that is not the lowest possible adopt the same tactics. There are a thousand possible examples of the phenomenon, but here, as one, is what the actor Hugh Grant wrote in public about Boris Johnson's Brexit policy:

You will not fuck with my children's future.... Fuck off you over-promoted bath toy.

There were, of course, arguments both for and against Brexit, but calling Johnson an over-promoted bath toy did not add much to the debate. Vulgar insult, however, is increasingly regarded by such as Grant as the highest, or at least the most effective, form of argument. Napoleon once said that the only effective rhetorical tactic was repetition. We now know that he was mistaken: Crude insult is the most effective, or believed to be so by such as Grant.

As it happens, Johnson himself employed a man as his special adviser, Dominic Cummings, who dressed like a thug and used language that a fishwife would have blushed to use. By doing

this, he imagined that he was distinguishing himself (in intellectually superior fashion) from the effete and ineffectual elite who nevertheless maintained some of the traditional proprieties.

But all that in theory is anti-elitist is not therefore egalitarian. Those of the elite who resort to the adoption of what they consider to be lower-class manners (though in England at least much of the working class was once extremely careful about its language, for example by never swearing in front of children) do not abjure their economic privileges; they have no wish to imitate the lower class in the matter of income, or live in lower-class houses, for example.

Perhaps they believe that by public coarseness other people will fail to notice that they are, in fact, part of a rarefied elite, and therefore will feel no dangerous envy toward them. They feel that they ought, for reasons of political philosophy, to be egalitarian, but they don't really want to be equal, either. The result is that they resort to the highest form of flattery, imitation, at least in those things that will not endanger their elite position.

And thus civilization crumbles.

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