

The Will to Outrage

By Theodore Dalrymple

No one, I imagine, would include a speech by Donald Trump in an anthology of succinctness or political eloquence. Whether he is too lazy to organize his thoughts, or simply incapable of doing so, I cannot say; I can say only that if I were in his audience, I should be furious at his apparent failure to prepare anything in advance. I should regard it as an insult that he deemed that I and all the people around me were not worth the effort.



That said, I found the response to his casual description of a female Alabama senator as a young and fantastically attractive person distinctly odd, at least if the reports I read of it were reliable. The *Independent* newspaper said that among the

commentary his description evoked was that it was “misogyny on full display.” Another commentator, not named, said, “It’s beyond disgusting how he talks about women. No one cared but him that [she] was ‘beautiful.’ It doesn’t matter. All women matter. All women are beautiful but that doesn’t mean it defines them.”

It is true, of course, that in the context, the attractiveness or appearance of the senator was, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the matter in hand. But to demand strict relevance of all speech would reduce most people to near silence, and conversation would become all but impossible. Nine-tenths of what we say is irrelevant.

What is bizarre is that some people regarded “young and fantastically attractive” almost as an insult, as bad and demeaning, perhaps, as “old and ugly.” If Mr. Trump had called the Alabama senator old and ugly, he would rightly have been accused of discourtesy at the very least, for no one calls anyone old and ugly meaning it to be anything other than an insult, even if it enunciates an evident truth. One draws a veil over such truths.

I suppose the two persons quoted by *The Independent* objected to the fact that Mr. Trump’s remark was a judgment and, as Doctor Johnson said, all judgment is comparative. If the Alabama senator was fantastically attractive, it implied that some people, including women, were not fantastically attractive, indeed may have been fantastically unattractive—as to me is Mr. Trump (this is not the same as saying that he is the worst candidate for the presidency in a severely limited field).

The idea that calling someone young and attractive constitutes misogyny is odd. It would also preclude anyone referring to an intelligent woman. A true misogynist would be someone who thought that *no* woman was beautiful, attractive, or intelligent, that women were, *ex officio*, contemptible stupid sluts or harridans.

Blinded by their rage, which obviously preexisted anything that Mr. Trump said about the Alabama senator, the commentators whom the newspaper quoted (I presume accurately) resorted to misunderstanding, non sequitur, and outright untruth. To say that a woman is beautiful is not to say that other women don’t “matter”; nor is it likely that “no one cares” whether the Alabama senator is or is not attractive. Indeed, someone may care who nevertheless thinks that her attractiveness is morally irrelevant to her political views or activities.

If all women are beautiful, then no woman is beautiful, for

aesthetic judgment requires difference and discrimination for it to be exercised. It is perfectly obvious in any case that it is untrue that all women are equally beautiful, as it is untrue that all women are 5 feet 4½ inches tall. This is so obvious—a thirty-second walk in any frequented street is enough to prove it—that only someone whose brain has been colonized and completely dominated by a foolish ideology that requires people to believe patent untruths could deny it.

What one sees in these comments is what might be called a will to outrage. More and more people, it seems, are like politicians who, cornered by their own unpopularity, seek a casus belli for a short victorious war to restore their popularity or their rule. But the modern will to outrage is chronic, so to speak; it is anger in search of an object and will find one everywhere.

Moral outrage is a pleasant state of mind, or at least one that has certain advantages. This is not to say that it is never justified, only that, having been found gratifying, there is a temptation and a tendency to prolong it and indeed to keep it permanent.

What are the advantages of moral outrage? Man is the only creature that seeks to find a transcendent purpose for his own life, though of course only a proportion of mankind seeks one. But for those people who do, an answer must be found. It used to be supplied by religion, but that satisfies ever fewer of them. A cause, or supposed cause, is the answer, feminism of the above commentators' kind being one among such answers.

A sense of outrage also serves to distinguish the person who feels it from people who do not and provide him or her with a sense of moral superiority. That is one of the reasons why an occasion for outrage is sought even on the most innocent and trivial of occasions. A throwaway line about the attractiveness of a minor politician is thus made to bear a heavy weight of condemnation, based upon a hinterland of the

most dubious theorizing. I am outraged, therefore I am good; I am outraged, therefore my life has a purpose. It is, in a word, outrageous.

This will to outrage, I should add, is found on all sides. It leads to an inquisitorial state of mind and soul, in which people are on the perpetual lookout for the most trivial manifestations of unorthodoxy to root out. In a culture of inquisition, disagreement is heresy; and if we have not yet reached a stage of the *auto-da-fé* in the literal sense, we are approaching it in a metaphorical sense.

The will to outrage is also the will to power; and the ultimate power is that of forcing people to believe, or to pretend to believe, what is patently untrue, for example that all women are beautiful, on pain of excommunication or worse.

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