



The Anatomy of Disgust

William Ian Miller

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William Miller embarks on an alluring journey into the world of disgust, showing how it brings order and meaning to our lives even as it horrifies and revolts us. Our notion of the self, intimately dependent as it is on our response to the excretions and secretions of our bodies, depends on it. Cultural identities have frequent recourse to its boundary-policing powers. Love depends on overcoming it, while the pleasure of sex comes in large measure from the titillating violation of disgust prohibitions. Imagine aesthetics without disgust for tastelessness and vulgarity; imagine morality without disgust for evil, hypocrisy, stupidity, and cruelty.

Miller details our anxious relation to basic life processes: eating, excreting, fornicating, decaying, and dying. But disgust pushes beyond the flesh to vivify the larger social order with the idiom it commandeers from the sights, smells, tastes, feels, and sounds of fleshly physicality. Disgust and contempt, Miller argues, play crucial political roles in creating and maintaining social hierarchy. Democracy depends less on respect for persons than on an equal distribution of contempt. Disgust, however, signals dangerous division. The high's belief that the low actually smell bad, or are sources of pollution, seriously threatens democracy.

Miller argues that disgust is deeply grounded in our ambivalence to life: it distresses us that the fair is so fragile, so easily reduced to foulness, and that the foul may seem more than passing fair in certain slants of light. When we are disgusted, we are attempting to set bounds, to keep chaos at bay. Of course we fail. But, as Miller points out, our failure is hardly an occasion for despair, for disgust also helps to animate the world, and to make it a dangerous, magical, and exciting place.

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