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The *Untermensch* as *Übermensch*

William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 270. \$25.00.

Paul Campos

I

Recently, I was given a curious gift: a compact disc, entitled *Golden Throats: The Great Celebrity Sing-Off*,¹ that contains a compilation of bad cover versions of famous rock and pop songs. These are not ordinary bad cover versions, however—e.g., Frank Sinatra crooning “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown,” or Tony Bennet belting out an unctuous version of “Moondance.” These cover versions defeat the resources of English critical prose. They are indescribably bad. Imagine Mr. French himself, Sebastian Cabot, “singing” Bob Dylan’s “It Ain’t Me Babe,” or a geriatric and apparently demented Mae West shrieking her way through “Twist and Shout.” Picture, if you can, Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise violating every conceivable artistic prime directive via his interpretations of “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” or—a personal favorite—“Mr. Tambourine Man.”

Golden Throats, which was put together by some evil genius at the invaluable Rhino Records (2225 Colorado Blvd., Santa Monica, CA), has become an after-dinner party favorite among those of my friends who share a certain perverse sense of humor. But why do we delight in these quite literally incredible performances? Answering this sort of question is a central concern of William Ian Miller’s remarkable and fascinating book, *Humiliation*.²

1. GOLDEN THROATS: THE GREAT CELEBRITY SING-OFF (Rhino Records).

2. WILLIAM I. MILLER, *HUMILIATION: AND OTHER ESSAYS ON HONOR, SOCIAL DISCOMFORT, AND VIOLENCE* (1993). Miller is Professor of Law at the University of Michigan and notes that “[b]y training I am a literary critic and philologist, by profession I have become a historian of medieval Iceland. By employment I am a law professor and teach traditional courses in law in addition to courses in line with the themes of this book.” *Id.* at xi. We can indulge in a bit of *Schadenfreude* (a major theme of the book) by imagining how this passage would enrage the likes of Judge Harry Edwards. See Harry T. Edwards, *The Growing Disjunction between Legal Education and the Legal*

Humiliation is a collection of five essays that touch upon a vast panoply of subjects: the heroic saga literature of medieval Iceland, the intricate social mores of contemporary American academics, the sociological analysis of gift exchange, the anthropology of violence, and the linguistic genealogy of human emotions are just some of the topics that engage the author's eclectic intelligence. A single broad theme links up these narrative threads. Professor Miller is undertaking an archaeology of the self, an attempt to describe and historicize those emotions—shame, humiliation, embarrassment—“which maintain us as self-respecting and respectable social actors.”³ The book is a cross-cultural study of the strategies of self-presentation which human beings employ to avoid the often excruciating sensations that accompany the loss of status, or that mark the sudden deflation of their pretensions to a status they have not achieved.

When we consider the phenomenon exemplified by *Golden Throats*, Miller's account of contemporary emotional life helps us to understand the very existence of such a bizarre artifact in a number of ways. First, the pleasure of listening to these songs is partly the pleasure of a delicious sort of *embarrassment*. These inept attempts at musical performance by nonmusical pop culture celebrities create in many listeners the vicarious sense of how the listener would feel if he were to expose his own inadequacies in such a public way. As Miller puts it, “[w]hen you experience [embarrassment] vicariously, you are imagining yourself in the position of the other and feeling her embarrassment as if you were her.”⁴

Second, we are pleausrably embarrassed because we perceive that these performers are *humiliating* themselves in a fashion that implicates all the dark comedy surrounding that particular emotion: “Our own embarrassment is often our best indication that we have judged others to be humiliating themselves.”⁵ The unfortunate Leonard Nimoy singing “If I Had a Hammer” in a monotone, or Andy Griffith preening as rock star *manqué* on “The House of the Rising Sun”—what better examples could be adduced of Miller's dictum that humiliation is what befalls us when we pretend to a status we have not achieved? And what of the *real* musicians who took part in these aesthetic atrocities now sealed within the digitized memory of a compact disc? Here a different set of emotions may well come into play, those that surround the word *shame*. How can serious musicians adequately rationalize participating in such travesties of their art? Have they not, perhaps, violated fundamental norms of honorable behavior among artists?

Profession, 91 MICH. L. REV. 34 (1992).

3. MILLER, *supra* note 2, at ix.

4. *Id.* at 155.

5. *Id.*

These are the kinds of seriously underinvestigated social phenomena with which *Humiliation* grapples. The book's intense focus on the actual instantiation of various forms of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment in human social life is exemplified by Miller's subtle analysis of the startling vignette with which he begins his narrative. Miller's central theme is that such apparently trivial social interactions are repositories of meaning that we can mine to help us better understand what it is to be a person. Miller presents the following true story:

Imagine hosting a get-together for a group of twelve. You have stocked up on food and drink, and because not a few of the members of the group are lusty drinkers, the drink alone represents a considerable expenditure. The time comes for the guests to arrive. No one appears. But no one is ever quite on time. More time passes; finally, one person shows. It is your friend in the group, the person who had introduced you into it, and the only person in it who up until then had not been an utter stranger to you. Now you both sit and wait. Did you forget to tell them the right time, the right day? The lateness passes beyond fashionableness, heading toward inconsiderateness and beyond into something more ominously disconcerting. At last a phone call. It is from a woman in the group, a lawyer, a toughminded, no-nonsense person. She tells you simply that people have decided not to come (they preferred watching the regional finals of the NCAA basketball tournament, she says, at her house; sorry for the inconvenience; you can come over if you like; good-bye). How would you feel? What did you ever do to deserve that?⁶

This grim parable is subjected to a detailed and convincing interpretation that strives to answer both questions posed by the author. The reader is treated to a story of social ineptitude and academic boorishness that proved immune to the normal disciplinary regime of the upper-middle class intelligentsia—"ignoring, eye-aversion, verbal put-downs, interruptions, dismissively short answers to his questions, using his name in direct address excessively or not at all"⁷—and which eventually provoked a communal act of genteel savagery that permanently ostracized the offender from the avenging group.

No one who has read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* ever forgets the gruesome account of the public torture-execution with which the book begins,⁸ but I would wager that, for a contemporary academic reader, Miller's initial narrative is in fact quite a bit more disturbing. Foucault, after all, is describing an almost fantastic scene from a faraway place, and the outlandish "barbarisms" of such odd people inevitably seem to have

6. *Id.* at 1.

7. *Id.* at 3.

8. MICHEL FOUCAULT, *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: THE BIRTH OF THE PRISON* 3-6 (1979).

little enough to do with us. By contrast, the shaming ritual in which Miller participated, and which he uses to immerse us in our own world of social discipline and punishment, strikes much closer to home.

The dark comedy of the "Introduction" prepares us for Miller's acute exploration of the wonderfully complex world of social meaning that inheres in the most quotidian rituals. The essay "Requiting the Unwanted Gift" builds upon the work of Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu⁹ to construct a hermeneutics of contemporary gift exchange, one that demonstrates how the apparently archaic codes of honor cultures, where insults are often perceived as (negative) gifts, and gifts can easily be construed as insults, still provide a kind of rumbling subtext to our more "innocent" gratuities. The rich texture of Miller's analysis comes through in this extended quotation:

Invitations to dinner have a logic of their own. . . . There are surely elements of potlatch or competitive gift exchange here. Among those who care about such things, being known as a good cook is not quite enough. One needs to be recognized as a better cook than the guest, if, that is, the guest pretends to a similar competence. An invitation to dinner from serious cooks has then something of the aspect of a challenge. But the challenge has different consequences depending on the guest. To guests who like playing that game, the chance to reciprocate is simply a part of the game, and the only anxieties generated are the usual ones in a clearly bounded contest. For those guests, however, who recognize a good meal when they see it but who also do not care to spend time on such things, the invitation generates real anxieties, the anxieties associated with how to reciprocate adequately. How in the world can one reciprocate and still not feel beholden? Whatever one serves will be plebeian fare as far as they are concerned. Nor can one solve the problem by taking them out to a good restaurant, for to take that course is an admission of moral failure, a blatant attempt to do with money what should have been done with the soul. One either must remain forever beholden or find some adequate way to excuse the inadequacy of the return. . . .

. . . What is clear is that invitations to dinner, if status, age, or familial conditions do not prevent it, raise the obligation to reciprocate as clearly as such an obligation can be raised in the world of gifts. And the reciprocation must be by return invitation unless one is able to do some very fancy maneuvering.¹⁰

What is being traced here is that secret economy of obligation whose rough contours we all dimly perceive, but which remains resistant to modern utilitarian analysis. The quasi-official ideology of gift-giving—that no

9. See MARCEL MAUSS, *THE GIFT: FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF EXCHANGE IN ARCHAIC SOCIETIES* (1967); PIERRE BOURDIEU, *OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF PRACTICE* (1977).

10. MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 25-27.

return is required¹¹—co-exists in tension with our subterranean loyalty to the ancient claims of universal reciprocity: “Gifts are obligation-creating, more viscerally so than contracts.”¹²

Miller’s analysis of gifts takes in such amusing phenomena as the bridal registry, the gift shop (which exists to purvey “those objects that proclaim their status as gift”), and the continuously circulating gift that keeps on giving.¹³ All of these practices are subjected to the most exacting particularist inquiry, yet Miller is also interested in analyzing them as theory-laden social games. Indeed, an interesting tension that runs through both this essay and the book as a whole is the mingling of a fascination with the game-theoretic qualities of social exchange with a distrust of, and even a disdain for, the reductive formalism of positivist social science.¹⁴ *Humiliation* can be read as a highly original attempt to work toward deploying something like the analytical power of game theory models upon the fantastically complex empirical situations that these models might actually address, but rarely do.

II

For most legal academics, the essay “Getting a Fix on Violence” is the most clearly relevant part of Miller’s book. It marks an important advance in the still-nascent (in the legal academy, anyway) discourse most commonly associated with Robert Cover’s work: how we see or fail to see violence, especially the violence of the state.¹⁵ Miller again undertakes an intensely particularist account of how we interpret the whole spectrum of those acts that are or can be recognized as violent, from the least

11. See JUDITH MARTIN, *MISS MANNER’S GUIDE FOR THE TURN-OF-THE-MILLENNIUM* (1990).

12. MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 17.

13. Miller’s distinguished predecessor in the study of medieval Northern European literatures, J.R.R. Tolkien, was also fascinated by gift-giving practices, and he incorporated that interest into the fantastic kingdoms of his fiction:

[A]nything that Hobbits had no immediate use for, but were unwilling to throw away, they called a *mathom*. Their dwellings were apt to become rather crowded with mathoms, and many of the presents that passed from hand to hand were of that sort . . . there were one or two old mathoms of forgotten uses that had circulated all round the district.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* 14, 46 (1977).

14. Although Miller himself does not employ formal game theory concepts in the course of his analysis, many of the social exchanges he narrates can be understood in those terms. Consider the narrative quoted *infra* page 432. If Miller were to encounter a similarly situated academic who *did* remember him, the two professors would face a variation of the famous “prisoner’s dilemma.” That is, each would consider the best outcome to be one in which he would treat the other with a “friendly” condescension that the other would accept as an appropriate expression of his/her relative hierarchical status. The worst outcome would be for both academics to treat each other with the former attitude, as this might lead to open conflict. Paradoxically, the best outcome for both *as a group* would be for each to display an egalitarian familiarity that, when displayed unilaterally, would leave either open to the crushing condescension of the hierarchical response, since this response can plausibly treat egalitarian familiarity as appropriate deference. For a good introduction to game theory, see WILLIAM POUNDSTONE, *PRISONER’S DILEMMA* (1992).

15. See Robert Cover, *Violence and the Word*, 95 *YALE L.J.* 1601 (1986).

ambiguous (“where fist meets face”) to the absurd rhetorical excesses of certain poststructuralist strands of literary criticism, which describe reading and writing as essentially “violent” acts.

Again, Miller’s account insists upon the socially constructed, perspectival quality of “violence.” What does it mean, he asks, to declare one society more or less violent than another? Clearly, he is attracted to Foucault’s skepticism concerning the supposedly inexorable march of progress, and his enormous range of cross-cultural examples only emphasizes the “hydra-like” quality of the subject. His idiosyncratic and complex approach leads the reader to question any complacent dichotomizations of victims and victimizers, of violence and the “mere” threat of violence, and of coercion and consent.

Some of the anthropological examples Miller uses to emphasize his points will strike the lay reader as bizarre. Consider the Gebusi of New Guinea, who by almost all conventional definitions seem to have constructed an utterly “nonviolent” culture. Nevertheless, the Gebusi have the world’s highest recorded homicide rate—a manifestation of their belief that all deaths from illness are caused by witchcraft, thus requiring the immediate killing of the guilty party.

Odd as the beliefs of the Gebusi may appear, we cannot ignore the contradiction-laden manner in which our own culture constructs and defines the “violent.” A recent study that used college students to grade various acts of television violence found that the students saw kicking the door down with a weapon as a violent act, that is, unless the kicker was a police officer, in which case the act was not violent, unless the police officer had no badge, in which case it was. Acts of physical destruction against a corpse were violent, but only if the actor was not the same person who did the killing in the first place.¹⁶

In the same spirit of cross-cultural skepticism, *Humiliation* asks us to compare a formal dinner party in the world chronicled by Henry James, where using the wrong fork could have disastrous social and even moral consequences, with a thirteenth-century feast in an English lord’s hall, where apparently “you could belch, pass gas, wheeze and hack, spit, vomit, and blow your nose in your hand and your status remained secure.” Yet “if someone tripped over your foot, tempers rose and serious violence could occur.”¹⁷ Such comparisons emphasize Miller’s insistence on asking *the* question that should trouble the Whig histories of all modern progressive ideologues: How does the intermittent experience of anarchic, pre-industrial violence compare with the continuous saturation of anxiety into every crevice of the contemporary social Panopticon? This question remains

16. *The Producers*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Dec. 13, 1993, at 14.

17. MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 200.

especially germane in the legal academy, where the violence of the state remains so obscured by the legitimating resonance of the word "law" that the most important jurisprudential text for an entire generation of scholars could assert, without irony or qualification, that "the only alternative to regularized and peaceable [i.e., judicial] methods of decision is a disintegrating resort to violence."¹⁸

III

What is humiliation? How do we distinguish it from the related emotions of shame and embarrassment? "Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic" lays the groundwork for answering these questions by undertaking the daunting task of attempting to capture the emotional flavor of life in the honor-based culture of saga Iceland. The point of this undertaking is twofold: to clarify the profound differences in emotional life between honor/shame and guilt/humiliation cultures,¹⁹ and to grapple with the serious methodological problems entailed by any exploration of the first-person ontology of human emotional experience.²⁰

Miller engages his audience in this enterprise through some close readings of passages from the Icelandic sagas. These remarkable narratives remain relatively neglected by our own literary culture, but Miller's passionate engagement with this literature comes across in his exegesis and draws the uninitiated reader toward the alien world that it describes. That world was archetypal in its use of honor as a central organizing principle. In stark contrast to our own therapeutized universe, the quintessentially modern concept of a socially autonomous self-esteem²¹ is incomprehensible in an honor culture, where reputation is everything, and where to be thought unworthy of honor by others within the validating group is the ultimate disaster—quite literally a fate worse than death:

Your status in this group was the measure of your honor, and your status was achieved at the expense of the other group members who were not only your competitors for scarce honor but also the arbiters of whether you had it or not. . . . The shortest road to honor was thus

18. HENRY HART & ALBERT SACKS, *THE LEGAL PROCESS* (tent. ed. 1958).

19. Miller notes that the classic distinction between shame and guilt cultures has been "rightly and roundly criticized," but argues that the distinction "still captures a fundamental difference . . . between a culture in which reputation is all and one in which conscience, confession, and forgiveness play a central role." MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 116.

20. "Because mental phenomena are essentially connected with consciousness, and because consciousness is essentially subjective, it follows that the ontology of the mental is essentially a first-person ontology. Mental states are always somebody's mental states." JOHN R. SEARLE, *THE REDISCOVERY OF THE MIND* 20 (1992).

21. Miller draws a characteristically vivid distinction between the meaning of shame in an honor culture and in our own social world: "The new shame might even be seen as the linchpin of a new politics of the antisocial, in which it is nearly supposed that a person should maintain high self-esteem no matter how inepit or offensive he or she might be." MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 135.

to take someone else's, and this meant that honorable people had to be ever-vigilant against affronts or challenges to their honor, because challenged they would be.²²

In such a culture *shame* is the key regulative status or emotion,²³ the distribution of which defines the economy of honor: "Shame is, in one sense, nothing more than the loss of honor."²⁴ And because that economy tends to be zero-sum, the relatively impoverished nature of the *material* economy of classic honor-based cultures only exacerbates a person's "concern about relative ranking, and such concern quickens interest in others and in where one stands relative to them; it prompts the desire to do the all-consuming work of acquiring and preserving honor."²⁵

Miller is keenly aware of how difficult it is to translate the details of another culture's emotional life into our own terms, and much of the essay is devoted to struggling with this issue. Although Miller acknowledges that "with distance comes . . . a certain methodological humility," he ultimately rebels against the particularist orthodoxy that claims to know with confidence that we cannot with confidence know the Other.²⁶ He is surely right to do so, for the eternally recurring squabble between particularist and universalist accounts of "human nature" is itself a pseudo-problem. Although, as Saul Kripke puts it, "everything is what it is and not another thing,"²⁷ the fact that we can certainly recognize *differences* between cultures assumes, as Miller points out, a certain degree of commonality between the very things being differentiated from each other. Everything will then turn on determining the extent of that "certain degree" in each particular case; and such judgments are necessarily independent of any theoretical precommitment to a general conceptual scheme, whether of particularist or essentialist design.

IV

What relevance does the struggle for honor within heroic cultures have to our own cultural practices? Miller's final two essays tie together the apparently disparate thematic threads of the previous chapters by weaving a historical narrative that reveals how our contemporary perceptions of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment are rooted in the practices of

22. *Id.* at 116-17.

23. In saga Iceland, shame was reified and nominalized to the point where it was "conceptualized as a thing rather than as a feeling, [yet] the sagas do on occasion describe what people felt when they had been done a shame." *Id.* at 122.

24. *Id.* at 118.

25. *Id.* at 130.

26. For the orthodox particularist "[d]ifference thus becomes an essential category immediately knowable, paradoxically, because unknowable." *Id.* at 197.

27. Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, in SEMANTICS OF NATURAL LANGUAGE (Donald Davidson & Gilbert Harman eds., 1971).

predecessor cultures. Miller's central claim is that the key to understanding the social and psychological complexity that still characterizes the most mundane day-to-day interactions, and the accompanying perception that "such simple interactions are fraught with danger is that we still feel the demands of something like honor very keenly."²⁸ That is, we believe, whether in a conscious or a visceral way, that we should "pay back what we owe, whether it be good or bad" and "that it matters deeply to us . . . that we acquit ourselves well with the people we encounter."²⁹ The book suggests that, in contrast with honor-based heroic cultures, where shame is the emotion that does the most basic work of social ordering, our culture typically gives this role to the set of emotions signified by the word *humiliation*.

Miller's argument requires that he specify the presently delineated boundaries between shame, humiliation, and embarrassment, and this he sets out to do. Yet the argument never fails to remind us that all such typologies will seem neater than the complex social reality that they try to capture: the resulting boundaries can only be somewhat arbitrary marks on a continuum, rather than the bright definitional lines often found in the more reductive styles of certain contemporary social sciences. Nevertheless, some fairly clear distinctions can be made:

(1) "Shame is the emotion of a universe that privileges ideas of honor, reputation, and respect, a world in which the public self dwarfs the private self."³⁰ Shame is that emotion which is "the consequence of not living up to what we ought to,"³¹ to be shamed is to suffer a degradation of status for having failed to adhere to important group norms.

(2) Humiliation, like shame, works by lowering, but this lowering involves the deflation of pretension rather than the degradation of one's previously legitimate niche in the social hierarchy. Humiliation is "the consequence of trying to live up to what we have no right to."³² The pretentious academic who lectures others on subjects that they know far better than he, the figure skater whose graceful leap ends in a ridiculous pratfall, the socially inept high school boy who dares ask the most popular girl in the class to the dance—each is humiliated by aspiring to a status that he or she is unable to obtain.

(3) While shame often partakes of the tragic, and humiliation of the darkly comic world of rough justice, embarrassment is the product of the relatively trivial social transgression, and is therefore the stuff of light comedy. Indeed, "it takes only a very subtle shift in context, distance, or

28. MILLER, *supra* note 2, at 204.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.* at 134.

31. *Id.* at 145.

32. *Id.*

involvement to turn embarrassing situations into causes for mirth both for observers *and* for the person embarrassed.”³³

One of Miller’s most powerful narrative tools is his Dostoyevskian willingness to expose himself to his own humiliating gaze so that he might, like Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man, always be one step ahead of others who are not as capable of perceiving his (and their own) imminent humiliation.³⁴ Consider the following account:

I was recently introduced to an academic whose work I knew. . . . We shook hands. He was polite and indicated that he knew who I was, although it was clear to me that he had never read any of my work. . . . After our introduction we engaged in pleasant conversation for some ten minutes, shook hands vigorously on parting, and gave each other hearty farewells registering our pleasure at finally meeting. These indications were mutual.

Then came a moment some two months later. We were in a similar setting and I looked toward him to catch from him the indication that a greeting was in order. He looked ever so briefly at me with the look of one who desires to avert his gaze quickly because caught impermissibly looking at someone he did not know. . . . My emotion at being so eminently forgettable was one of humiliation. It clearly was neither shame nor embarrassment. . . .

. . . *I felt humiliated because I knew that he would be embarrassed if he learned that he knew me.*³⁵

Here, we are reminded of the ability of a ruthlessly honest narration to show us the familiar world with unusual clarity—like the lady in *Anna Karenina* whose willingness simply to say what she was actually thinking astounded the fashionable circles of St. Petersburg society so deeply that they credited her with formulating the most brilliant aphorisms.

Note also the almost paradoxical quality of such social interchange: Miller illustrates how humiliation, embarrassment, and shame are quintessentially emotions that depend upon our *self-regard*, yet that same self-regard is itself, to the extent that we are not psychotic, ultimately dependent upon the social judgments of the very world from which our self-regard attempts to insulate us. One of *Humiliation*’s strengths is the manner in which it reminds readers how unrealistic the cruder versions of atomistic liberalism can be: how the social construction of reality seeps into every corner of experience, belying the notion of the presocial self favored by various formalistic academic disciplines.

33. *Id.* at 149.

34. Miller sees in Dostoyevsky’s work the celebration of self-humiliation as a kind of inverse virtue: “It is in Dostoyevsky that we find anatomized humiliation as identity, humiliation as the substance of a kind of perverse spiritual hierarchy in which people are ranked by how obsessively self-torturing they are. . . . This is the *Untermensch* as *Übermensch*.” *Id.* at 170-72.

35. *Id.* at 149-50.

How, then, can we avoid humiliation? Miller argues that we cannot, that if we are properly socialized persons the “structural pretension” built into many everyday social interchanges will place us in situations of ranked social difference where we will humiliate and be humiliated merely through the act of maintaining our social identities. Attempts at hypercorrection (the working class person who tries to use “proper” English when talking to a professional) or hypocorrection (the professional who inserts swear words as rhythmic filler when speaking to working-class people) will often only make things worse.

Humiliation then can be seen as the common currency of emotional exchange in any society that features sufficient levels both of status stratification and of status mobility to ensure that almost any social situation may reveal someone as aspiring to a status he or she has not achieved. And of course in a society as protean as the United States, yesterday’s parvenu is often today’s aristocrat, and vice versa. Seen in this light, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s quip that in American lives there are no second acts could not be more mistaken. Indeed, Miller’s exploration of the differences between heroic honor cultures and modern America suggests that while, in the former, to be truly shamed constituted a relatively immutable disaster, to be humiliated in contemporary America means, for most of us, nothing more than that our work was reviewed by our employer or that we asked someone for a date, or that we tried out for the baseball team, etc., and that the predictable disappointments did not fail to disappoint.

V

Ultimately, the questions that interest Miller are those difficult and perhaps unanswerable questions that modern academic disciplines are to some extent constructed to avoid:

What would it be like to have lived back then? Which time (place) was the best of times, which was the worst of times? These are the kinds of questions that drive the production of written history. Even the most dry-as-dust professionalized historian is driven by them. The questions are moral ones. They require us to make judgments about the good life, about justice, about bodily security, about wealth and its distribution. They invite us also to personalize and romanticize, to wonder whether we would have been better or worse off then, feared more or less, been safer, more secure, more fulfilled, less harried.³⁶

Miller’s work asks such questions directly, while never losing sight of the sometimes insuperable methodological obstacles faced by anyone who

36. *Id.* at 90.

strives to get inside another person's head or another place's culture. *Humiliation* is thus a text that pursues its quarry not so much *across* as *through* those disciplinary distinctions—between anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literary criticism, and social history—that might interfere with undertaking the challenging inquiries that engage his curiosity.

Perhaps the highest compliment that can be paid to a contemporary piece of academic writing is that *we do not know what it is*. In the essays that make up *Humiliation*, Professor Miller is not "doing" "materialist anthropology," or "social history," or any other sufficiently conventionalized discourse that would allow us to pigeonhole the author's work even before reading it. Rather, he is deploying the resources of a host of disparate disciplines in order to reveal the remarkable richness of certain emotional experiences—emotions that help shape the words and actions of human beings when they perform the immensely complex work of maintaining the social worlds that they construct, and which help construct them. In doing so, he has written a unique and valuable book.