

ABSOLUTELY MORE OR LESS

MY TITLE DECLARES a conundrum, one perhaps called “change.” It all has to do with absolutes.

Absolutes invite exceptions. Exceptions lead to more absolutes. Now why the second of these truths should be so is absolutely unclear. But the first is simple. We dislike being told what our limits are. Except that we seem always to seek more limits. Attached to every positive choice, every approving judgment, every affirmative decision, there is a negative, or at least a series of alternatives. And the very fact of the existence of these (“negative”) alternatives probably guided the initial affirmation or approval. Western culture has taught us, for example, that we choose right by recognizing what is wrong. Think of Milton, and his dismissal of cloistered virtue. (Hindu culture argues in another way, affirms that the alternative to a single choice or expression is the entirety of choices, including the one — not the entirety of choices *excepting* the one. But this [alternative] system of argument has not yet deeply marked Western thought.) Western thought tries to reduce choices to binaries, frequently distorting the range of possibility in the process. Hence my title. Binaries invite us to think in absolutes. Yes/no. Black/white. On/off. No room for maybe. Western culture rhetorically repudiates *maybe*. (“Don’t sit on the fence,” “You’re either for us or against us,” “weasel words.”) Such repudiations are (as here) often illogical, but many people find inconsistency a greater sin than illogicality — hence their tolerance for absolutes, and absolutism. For the sake of illusory security of predictability (“you know where you stand”), they accept the rigidity that denies freedom of choice (you know at least where you are chained). But perhaps “freedom of choice” disguises another tyrannical absolute? Our language is full of *relative* words (*more, less, sometimes, seldom, often, fewer, less, more, better, worse, usually*). The rigid don’t like them, for they invite the uncertainty of decision. But attached to every decision is the refuted alternative. Hence the freedom to choose, the freedom to be inconsistent, absolutely, is involved even in its illusory chaos in the process of drawing lines. Demarcating. Making distinctions. A qualification is itself a judgment. What this means is that value, like

meaning, is a social agreement, which in turn means that it's open to change. Absolutely, more or less.

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The attraction of binary/critical rhetoric is that it seems to draw on a secure source of knowledge, a source perhaps beyond the reach of the ordinary. Such an illusion — like jargon — protects another demarcation, for it defines the privileged as the arbiters of value, setting the “ordinary” aside, excluding (it, them) from the authority to judge, if not absolutely from the freedom to choose. Limiting the options among choices, however — sometimes through irony, sometimes through false logic, sometimes through parody, anger, innuendo, moral appeal, or some other means — limits freedom even while appearing to preserve it. Consider George Eliot, writing in one of the *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*:

We soak our children in habits of contempt and exultant gibing, and yet are confident that — as Clarissa one day said to me — “We can always teach them to be reverent in the right place, you know.” And doubtless if she were to take her boys to see a burlesque Socrates, with swollen legs, dying in the utterance of cockney puns, and were to hang up a sketch of this comic scene among their bedroom prints, she would think this preparation not at all of the prejudice of their emotions on hearing their tutor read that narrative of the *Apology*, which has been consecrated by the reverent gratitude of ages. This is the impoverishment that threatens our posterity: — a new Famine, a meagre fiend with lewd grin and clumsy hoof, is breathing a moral mildew over the harvest of our human sentiments.

Or consider John Leonard, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1980:

To stare at a year of fiction is to have a year of fiction stare back at you, like a basilisk. A novel is an accident waiting for a season to happen to it, a reptilian dream, unaccountable. . . .

Some of them are acquainted with the best-seller lists; most are not. They were probably not sincere enough about the obvious.

These are potent appeals to agree, because those who do so place themselves rhetorically among the elect of the inner circle. That's where one kind of security lies. Perhaps it's also what these people believe. Absolutely. Such beliefs, however, are codifications of value rather than ultimate expressions of value. Those who hold these beliefs face challenge from those who disagree with them, those who find themselves absolutely denied expression, more *or* less, by their particular demarcation of authority.

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Which returns me to the conundrum. For we all, one way or another, cleave to demarcations somehow, even when we espouse relative values rather than fixed ones. Doctrinal flexibility is still doctrinal. And repeatedly, we define — or run up against — someone's limit to pluralism.

But whose? If values are indeed socially, collectively established, perhaps we can agree that racism, sexism, violence, and pornography are “wrong” — because they’re *not right*, among other, less binary reasons. But by whose definition? At what point does something *become* “pornographic”? Whose boundary sets our values? Do such definitions and boundaries serve only those currently holding power or do they allow for choices? Do they rely on the uncertainty of an appeal to “tradition” or the seeming certainty of half-truths? Do we mistake distortion for information — or vice-versa? Do we accept the possibility of alternatives and alternative values, or do we, just possibly, embrace a set of alternatives as a new absolute, as confining as the old set in that (or although) it exchanges one group of authorities for another? Does power deny the desire to share choice? Does “or” expand or unduly limit the options we wish to exercise? More? Or less?

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I have been reading Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*, with a mix of admiration and uncertainty. Cogently and lucidly (my criteria of judgment?), the author traces a brief history of “Anglo-American” (including brief reference to Australia, ignoring Canada absolutely) and “French” (still ignoring Canada) feminist criticism. She finds the first group politically preoccupied but not sufficiently committed to political change, the second group linguistically and philosophically engaged but often politically mistaken. (“There is nothing surprising in this; all forms of radical thought inevitably remain mortgaged to the very historical categories they seek to transcend.”) Moi also explicates the arguments of a series of particular theorists — Millett and Showalter to Cixous and Irigaray, among others — in the process (inevitably?) articulating obliquely her own vision (version) of the need for dynamic social change. Such a process leads her to challenge existing authority — its closed systems, its limited choices — but it leads her also to oppose unfettered pluralism.

But if we wax pluralistic enough to acknowledge the feminist position as just one among many ‘useful’ approaches, we also implicitly grant the most ‘masculinist’ of criticism the right of existence: it just *might* be ‘useful’ in a very different context from ours.

Such a comment purports to be a self-evident truth — i.e., to dismiss the (absolute) enemy without querying whether or not the absolutism of the dismissal re-enacts the forms of the system it challenges. “Mortgaged” thus to historical categories herself, Moi goes on to praise Derrida for his “utopian” aspiration for “the multiplicity of sexually marked voices,” without reconciling (or perhaps choosing to reconcile or choosing to try to reconcile) the inconsistent relation between plurality and boundary. About Julia Kristeva, Moi writes further that her “romanticizing of the marginal is an anti-*bourgeois*, but not necessarily anti-*capitalist*, form of

libertarianism.” Using the word *romanticizing* pejoratively is part of her own political vocabulary; the word *mortgaged*, like the word *capitalist*, declares her commitment to *the* system she sees as *the* alternative to the present one and the (only logical) end of feminist change. Adjectives aside, is it necessarily “*the*”? Like Eliot and Leonard and many others, Moi appears to examine a range of possibilities while relying on a residual binary in order to judge and make distinctions.

What if we don’t fit inside it? What if we live instead in a mixed economy (take that as metaphor as well as denotative term) and choose to stay there, arguing that it potentially allows for a greater number of choices and fewer restrictions on the paradigms of self-expression? Do we gain by refusing the boundary of system? Or do we consign ourselves to powerlessness, revelling in a romantic version of marginality or “self” when we could accept the choice to join in the prevailing system and to assert power as others have defined it for us? As with so many options — do you want absolutely more or absolutely less? — this distinction relies on another false binary. For it is the same “others” who define power in this paradigm who also declare where the margins are. If we accept that we live on their margins rather than believe that they live on ours (if indeed we can adequately identify “their” and “our”), then we have accepted their boundaries, their determinations of power and value. If, however, we can dream and design alternatives, we can choose with a variety of positives in mind rather than a singular threat of negative. Possibly.

But to do so still leaves the conundrum. We design our own boundary lines in the process of claiming freedom; we invoke limits to pluralism in the name of the freedom we claim; we live with inconsistency. Maybe that’s absolute reality. What we have to learn — again, and then again — is to refuse to identify “rules” with logic and “inconsistency” with chaos.

W.N.

WEEDS

Andrew Wreggitt

russian thistle
dandelions
sweet, deep clover

The dog pushes his muzzle through . . .
long grasses sweeping past his ears
shhh shhh
His tail swoops in the air
while the rest of him tunnels
in the thick leaves, thick smell,