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Choice and Circumstance*

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First, two stories.

A friend, after struggling with years of infertility, divorces her husband. Single now, and still grieving her childlessness, she begins to explore the option of single-parent adoption. She tells me that she thinks in the end she will probably decide against adoption, but, in her words, "At least I'll know that I'm childless by choice."

An applicant to our graduate program in philosophy, accepted as well by one (but only one) other graduate program, wrestles with his decision. Finally he decides to attend the other program, but he thanks me for our offer, telling me, "I'm glad that at least I had a choice."

I want to focus a bit on these two stories, for while the central conclusion in each -- something turning on the importance of choice -- is initially compelling, it is also, on reflection, philosophically puzzling. It is compelling, because many of us in similar positions would share this response; phenomenologically, it feels right to us. We want to believe that the central facts of our lives -- whether or not we have children, where we are educated, what career we follow, with

whom we join as partners -- contain in them some fundamental element of our own selection and decision. We will be exploring below exactly what will turn out to be important here, and why, but for now, in our pre-reflective grasp of this phenomenon, we can say that it seems to have something to do with the value we place on autonomy, self-governance, self-authorship. We want, metaphorically speaking, to write the story of our own lives.

But let me now begin to draw out why I find this insistence on the importance of choice, which so many of us would share, to be so puzzling. Both individuals, in both stories, want to be offered a certain additional option in order to have -- or at least to feel that they have? -- a choice about what they are going to do next. But, on the one hand, we could argue that, even with this added option, they still don't have a "real" choice -- they don't have the choice of doing what they most want to do; and on the other hand, one could argue that even without the added option, they always had some choice. Let me explain.

In the first story, my friend certainly doesn't have open to her the option that would have been her first choice (and, in our society, what we might call the standard choice, the most frequently chosen option): to produce a biological child with her partner in a happy marriage. Nor does she have the option to produce a biological child outside of marriage. Why does the addition of the (for her) suboptimal option of adoption as a

single parent make so much difference? It is also worth noting that, should one make the choice to be a parent, one seldom has the further option of choosing the particular child or children one comes to parent. Except in old-fashioned stories, where childless couples search the wards of a local orphanage for just the right child to adopt, or in futuristic stories, where prospective parents can special-order babies from a genetic-engineering catalog, one gets whatever child one gets. I myself chose to have two children, and I have two biological children, but I certainly never was given the choice of which two. Children just arrive, presenting themselves to us in the birthing room of a local hospital or in the waiting room of some international airport. We choose to have them, but we do not choose them as individuals.¹

Likewise, in the second story, the student doesn't have open to him the option of attending a top-ten graduate program, the kind of program that might significantly increase the chance of his someday getting a job in the profession. Why does adding another second-tier school to the pool matter? And even if the student were given a choice of all the best graduate schools in the country, or the world for that matter, he is limited by what graduate schools there are. One might wish to attend a school that had Professor X from University A and Professor Y from University B, located where University C is now fortunately situated, but with the funding available from University D. One

is always constrained to some degree by the brute fact that the world is as it is and not as one would wish it to be. We choose against a background of circumstances beyond our control.

On the other hand, in the second story, the student certainly had the choice already of attending the one graduate school to which he had been admitted or not attending graduate school at all; he had the choice of going on in philosophy or pursuing some other profession altogether. Even if he had lacked a choice between A and B, he would have had the choice between A and not-A. Why is a choice between particular graduate schools the important one, rather than the broader choice of what to do next in his life, ranging across all the open possibilities?

In the infertility story, as well, my friend has a range of choices beyond simply "child or no-child." There are a wealth of ways in which one can have and enjoy children in one's life, above and beyond being the parent of one particular child. One could bring children into one's life as an aunt, a godmother, a teacher, a foster parent, a Big Sister, a friend. Or one could choose to assign the category of parent or non-parent only a minor role in one's self-description.

I am puzzled, then, about what it is that we want when we want to have a choice, narrowly focused as a choice among several clearly defined options. I am puzzled, first, about what it even is to "have" an option. Considering the second

story: does a certain graduate program cease to be an option when I am not admitted to it? I could, instead, view my non-admission as suggesting I need to develop my credentials and reapply. Does it cease to be an option if I am admitted, but lack the funds to attend? If I lack the funds to attend, but could have them if I were willing to borrow, but I happen to have an aversion to borrowing? If I am committed to a relationship with someone who lives far away from this graduate program? If someone I simply can't stand has been admitted there, too? But let me set aside this first question (we will return to it below) to turn to my second, and central, one: Assuming we can somehow differentiate and count the options we have, do we really think that the mere addition of options per se should be important to us? We can answer this question by pointing to various instrumental advantages that come to us from choice: in particular, to the hope that we will get happier results by being offered an additional option from which to choose, for this may turn out, upon deliberation, to be our most attractive option. The larger the pool of jobs for which I am eligible, or geographical regions in which I can reside, or possible people I can marry, the greater the chance of finding at least one job I can stand doing, one climate in which I can abide living, one person with whom I can bear sharing a life. At least so the argument goes.

In the two stories which frame our discussion, however, my infertile friend and the disappointed student don't seem to have this concern uppermost in their thoughts, although it doubtless colors their deliberation. My friend, after all, seemed fairly certain in advance which option she would end up choosing; even after considering adoption, she expected to remain childless, but now "childless by choice." Likewise, the graduate student who refused our offer expressed himself to be initially disposed to favor the other program and, indeed, ending up choosing it in the end. Of course, upon reflection they might have changed their mind. Faced with an actual choice between options, one gathers information, weighs and sifts it, reexamines one's own predilections and preferences. The results of this process may be predictable, but they are not preordained. And sometimes, though one option is the predicted selection, we surprise ourselves by wanting to make the other choice, and find ourselves happier because we selected it. Still, appealing to the instrumental value of choice seems not to capture what matters most to us in cases such as these.

Nor do the protagonists in these two stories seem particularly concerned about the developmental value of choice; that, as Mill suggested, the opportunity to make choices enables us to grow and develop as persons. It doesn't seem that either my friend or the student are eager to get practice in making

choices, or that their development hinges on their having been able to select an item from a menu of real options.

Still reviewing instrumental grounds for valuing choice among a range of options, we could say that part of the value of having options, in some cases, lies in the value for us of being offered options by others. One wants to be wanted: to feel popular, desired, courted. This will not come into play in all choice situations, but it doubtless plays some significant role in the pleasure with which we contemplate offers of admission to schools, job offers, proposals of marriage. Thus in Louisa May Alcott novels, society girls brag to one another about how many proposals they have received, as how many "birds they have bagged." I'm sure that the graduate student in our story doesn't want to have to say, later on in life, when fellow classmates ask him, "Where else did you get in?": "Nowhere." But this concern -- to be valued and sought after by others -- plays no role in my friend's infertility story. Nor does it seem to be all that is driving the student's welcoming of an opportunity for genuine choice.

The value of choice here, then, seems to be more than just instrumental, as these are cases where the instrumental value of choice is minimal. These two cases seem to suggest that we want to have and make choices not only because of the good results that will accrue to us in this way, but because we believe that a life in which we choose between options is better than a life

in which we do not. I have focused on two cases in which individuals are not offered their most favored alternative; but even if they were offered their first choice, they might value being able to choose it from a menu of alternatives, rather than simply being offered it outright. Why?

As we circle around this question, it helps to ask a related question. Assuming that it might reasonably matter to us to be able to choose from some menu of options, how many options should there be, optimally, on this menu? Where choices are conceived as choices among a range of options -- attend school a, b, c, d, or e; work in job f, g, h, i, or j; marry suitor l, m, n, o, or p -- how many items would one want to see on the selection menu? As many as possible? At least two? Three? No more than five?

On the related questions of whether choice has intrinsic or only instrumental value, and on how much choice is desirable, philosophers have adopted two positions. While everyone seems to agree that it is desirable to make one's central life choices from some range of options, Thomas Hurka argues that it is desirable that this range be as extensive as possible, because he sees the number of options as connected to the possession of autonomy, and he believes that autonomy has, above and beyond its clear instrumental value, intrinsic value as well.² Gerald Dworkin, on the other hand, argues that more options are not necessarily better than fewer options; the mere having of

choices, per se, is not and cannot be intrinsically valuable.³ I want to argue here against Hurka and with Dworkin, and then go on to make sense of the importance placed on choice in our two examples.

Hurka poses the question this way: "Imagine that there are ten possible actions, which an agent ranks in order of preferability from one to ten. . . . If all ten are available to her she can choose autonomously among them, or choose more autonomously than if she only had one. But what if that one were the highest-ranked action, the one she prefers to all others? Why would it be worse to lack autonomy if she still had her most-favoured option?"⁴ He replies that the intrinsic value of autonomy lies in its helping to realize the ideal of intentional agency. The agent selecting from ten options exercises her agency more fully, making more of a causal impact on the world, because she not only brings it about that A (her first-choice option); she also brings it about that not-B, not-C, and so forth. Whereas the agent limited to the choice of A or not-A, albeit where A is her first choice, only brings it about that A. "The first person is responsible for more facts about her life, and thus is more expansively an agent."⁵

But surely it cannot be a particularly valuable exercise of agency simply to bring about all the ways in which the world is not, to be responsible for determining a myriad of things that are not the case. On the one hand, we are always affecting the

world by this kind of negative agency. Doing one thing always involves doing lots -- arguably an infinite number -- of other things. On the other hand, not all the not-doings we effect are morally substantive. Though Hurka attempts to accommodate both of these points, his response is unsatisfying. Hurka himself acknowledges that we don't enhance the value of our lifting our fork if we simultaneously "think of all the other things we are not doing and consciously reject them."⁶ But he dismisses this claim because he maintains, first, that we do not need to act consciously in order to act intentionally, and, second, that the act in question -- raising one's fork -- is a trivial one, and so the availability of options to it is "of minimal value."⁷ But where we are choosing to be, say, a doctor, and consciously rejecting the live options of being, say, a lawyer, a dentist, a teacher, and a pastor, each of these 'negative acts' of rejection is also a positive act for which we can claim credit as agents.

I am unconvinced. Despite Hurka's disclaimer here, there are simply too many ways that the world is not for us to be able even to differentiate them, let alone to see them as flowing from our own causal powers. While I admit that there are moments at which I sense a fork in my life's path, where I am conscious of the fact that my choice at this turning point will determine a great deal about the future course of my life, this quickly gets out of hand, as, upon reflection, just about every

moment of my day offers such a turning point. This is especially so if one follows Hurka in claiming that one need not even have one's choice in consciousness! On my way to work, I do not swerve into the other lane to hit the ongoing car; I do not simply keep on driving until I end up in California; and so on. Claims about the significance of our choosing not to do things cannot bear the weight Hurka seeks to place upon them.

Joseph Raz also defends the need for "an adequate range of options," though he does not suggest that we should desire to maximize the number of options indefinitely.⁸ He notes, however, that it is not so much the number but the variety of options that matters: "A choice between hundreds of identical and identically situated houses is no choice, compared with a choice between a town flat and a suburban house, for example."⁹ But on closer examination, we can see that the example is a peculiar one. First, it's not clear how we are to interpret the idea of hundreds of identical and identically situated houses: Leibniz's Principle of the Identify of Indiscernibles comes to mind here. A south-facing 1910 white house situated on Main Street in Cleveland is not obviously identical to a south-facing 1910 house on Main Street in Boca Raton. But neither are the two 1910 houses situated across the street from each other in Cleveland.¹⁰

Closely related to this is the problem of giving substance to the idea of variety, for it is so clearly relative to

unspecified background decisions regarding how much of the context of choice one should hold fixed. When I bought my house, I agonized over what someone else could describe as the choice between hundreds of all but "identical and identically situated" houses; the town flat and suburban home are much more like each other than either is like a tepee or an igloo or the Taj Mahal; all middle-class homes are more like each other than they are like mansions or hovels. What is our comparison class supposed to be? It's hard to see how we can answer this question in clear and usefully general terms.

Dworkin, taking the other side, points out a number of factors that could make it rational to prefer not to have one's options increased: it takes time and effort to make choices; with increased choices come increased moral responsibilities as well as external pressures to exercise choice in one way or another; additional options can work to change the character of the options we already have. He argues against the intrinsic value of choice by noting that if choice were intrinsically valuable, there could be some scenario in which one should rationally prefer to be offered a choice between getting second-ranked B and third-ranked C rather than simply getting first-ranked A outright. This strikes Dworkin as implausible: why should I ever prefer to receive a lower-ranked alternative?

This doesn't trouble me as much as it troubles Dworkin, given the enormous instrumental value we place on having choice,

generally. But I welcome Dworkin's reminder that not everybody does prefer to have or exercise choice, and that even those who generally value choice may not value or welcome it on every occasion. Some people, for example, prefer not to make a conscious, explicit choice of whether or not to have children. They decide instead simply to stop using contraception and "see what happens." Of course, we can understand this as their making a choice not to choose, and certainly they cannot escape responsibility for the outcome of their actions by protesting that no actual choice was involved. Still, this kind of attitude shows a willingness to "let the universe decide." Although not necessarily at odds with the view that choice is inherently valuable, it does suggest that -- for some people -- this value is overridden by other values. Now, sometimes, in the process of abdicating choice, one will have one's true preferences revealed to one -- as one may suddenly realize, when the coin is in the air, which way one desperately hopes it will land. As months without contraception pass and no child appears, some people will feel disappointment, while others will feel relief. But sometimes one may not care, or come to care, about the outcome, either way.

Most of us, however, do not delegate our central life choices to a coin toss. We insist on the importance of choosing, even above and beyond the hope of enhancing our own

welfare, of ending up with a happier life. I want now to return to our central question: Why?

First we need to note, in order to bracket, the special disvalue we place on coerced choice. Even the coin-flipping couple would likely protest bitterly a government policy that settled their choice by dictating that they must or must not conceive a child. I want to argue, however, that our reaction here turns not on our wanting to have some specified menu of options presented to us, but on our views about the acceptable limits and justification of governmental interference in the private lives of citizens and on the acceptable means by which one party may exercise influence over another. We do not want to be coerced by wrongful threats of force into making our choices, even where the choice we are pressured to make is the choice we wanted to make, or would have made, anyway. Moreover, if the menu of options is severely enough limited through governmental coercion, this increases the chance that one will find oneself trapped in some particularly miserable life situation -- a point which I will take up immediately below.

I want to remind us here, however, that we will always be making our choices against the background of others' predicted or actual reactions to those choices, so we cannot expect to make our choices in a moral vacuum, influenced by nothing. Others can legitimately seek to influence us in our choices; we distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate influence

according to the means used, and perhaps according to the relationship in which the parties stand to each other.

I also want to note at somewhat greater length, also in order to bracket, the special disvalue we place on being placed, coercively or not, in situations of extreme deprivation. Raz, arguing for the importance of our having "an adequate range of options" in our lives, concedes that to specify the criteria for adequacy here "is an enormously difficult problem," for which he is unable to offer a solution.¹¹ But he gives us two imaginary cases in which he thinks we would agree that the agent's clear lack of adequate options obviates the possibility of his or her autonomy. The first case is that of The Man in the Pit, who must spend the rest of his life confined to a pit, his choices limited to "whether to eat now or a little later, whether to sleep now or a little later, whether to scratch his left ear or not."¹² The second case is that of The Hounded Woman, who spends her life trapped on a small desert island, where all her energies are devoted exclusively to trying to escape a fierce, carnivorous beast. Raz argues that "neither the Man in the Pit nor the Hounded Woman enjoy an autonomous life. The reason is that though they both have choices neither has an adequate range of options to choose from. . . The one has only trivial options to choose from. . . The other person's predicament is the opposite one. All her choices are potentially horrendous in their consequences."¹³

Now, I would be the first to admit that I have no desire to live the life of either the Hounded Woman or the Man in the Pit. But it seems somewhat odd to describe the unattractiveness of their lives in terms of their lacking autonomy, as a result of their lacking an adequate selection of options over which to exercise their autonomy. First, it seems to me that certain sorts of narrowing of choice are bad, period, not bad-because-they-limit-one's-autonomy. If I were ever to find myself in Raz's pit, I don't think what I would mourn is the loss of having options generally, but the loss of the particular options themselves -- the loss of lots of particular options, such as the option of taking a walk, or taking a bath, or reading a book, or looking at something other than the inside of a pit. You might say that I would see my loss as conjunctive rather than disjunctive: rather than mourning that now I no longer have the choice of being in a pit or taking a walk or reading a book or admiring the view, I would say that now I can no longer take a walk and I can no longer read a book and I can no longer admire a view. Second, limitations on options per se don't necessarily destroy autonomy. As one who still remembers reading Victor Frankl in high school, I want to remind Raz that the Man in the Pit has left to him the momentous and perhaps all-important choice of how to respond attitudinally to his fate: he retains the choice of what to think, what to feel, whether or not to pray.

I would give a similar account of the plight of the Hounded Woman. Her central problem, in my view, is not her lack of autonomy, her paucity of options, but the desperate, soul-destroying conditions of her life in their own right. It isn't so much that she lacks options, but that she lacks them because she is pursued by a terror no human being should ever have to face. And, like the Man in the Pit, the Hounded Woman arguably has the choice of whether to respond to her predicament with resignation, rage, or a kind of wild, exultant joy.

Raz writes that even though The Hounded Woman has a choice between survival and death, this is "no choice at all" because it fails to meet his condition that a choice "not be dominated by the need to protect the life one has."¹⁴ It does seem right to me that the forced choice between survival and death is a choice no one should have to face, and that those who face it have a legitimate complaint against the universe. But is it true that the choice between survival and death is "not a choice"? Are sufficiently unattractive options no longer "real options" at all?¹⁵

Now, to the extent that various options are accompanied by various "costs" imposed on us by others, they become less attractive to us, and when they become sufficiently unattractive, we tend to say that they are no longer "real" options and the choice between them is not a "real" choice: it is no choice at all. I am wary of this terminology, however,

for an option does not become any less "real" simply because we decide it is not, on balance, one that we wish to choose.¹⁶ Insofar as we have any notion of what counts as having an option, an option is no less an option for being rejected in the end.

Yet it does seem, in the two cases we are examining -- the infertile friend and the disappointed student-- that both parties would probably not feel they had had a "real choice" if their only option were between the status quo and a seriously unattractive option. My friend would not feel as if she were childless by choice if her choice were between childlessness and adopting a severely disabled (say, autistic) child; the student would not feel "At least I had a choice" if his only option were to choose between the good program he accepted and a fourth-rate program.

Alan Wertheimer suggests that where the distance between two options is too great, what is diminished is not choice (for that continues to exist), but the possibility of meaningful deliberation: "deliberation requires enough potential distance [between two options] to make a choice worthwhile, but not so much as to make it unnecessary."¹⁷ Both my friend and the graduate student engage in significant deliberation as they face their choice, and it is this possibility of active deliberation that is part of what they value in being offered an additional option.

Once, again, why? If we set aside the instrumental value of deliberative choice among options in raising the odds that we will get more of what we antecedently want, and the developmental value of choice in shaping our character, and the satisfaction in being the sort of person to whom options are offered, what is left?

What is left is whatever value we place on authenticity as one of life's fundamental goods. We want a sense that we are the authors of our own lives, that our lives, if you will, are stories that we write rather than just read. We want a sense of our lives as something we do and not something that merely happens to us. This seems to be what the protagonists of our two stories care about; they want to be in an active rather than a passive role in respect to their lives. But can this claim about the importance of authenticity stand up under scrutiny?

For after all, by and large our lives do happen to us. Consider marriage. While I may in some sense have selected my mate, I selected this one out of a fairly skimpy list of available possibilities -- defined here as adult human beings I happened to have known who were single, available, and interested in me. Already the universe of choice has shrunk from some three billion persons on the planet to perhaps -- thirty? And those thirty were on my list only because I happened to live in this particular city, and to follow this particular profession, and so on and so forth. I met my own

spouse on a canoe trip; if we had not met that day, we would never have met. Nor would I have had my children, or moved to my spouse's home-state, or taken a job at the university there -- or, likely, be writing this article today. And I only went on that canoe trip because I was supposed to be going on a camping trip that weekend with a friend, but she canceled, because her brother had come unexpectedly to town, and so I thought I might as well do something outdoorsy . . . Where does the element of choice come in?

My hunch, and this does sound deflationary, I am afraid, is that all that we can care about when we care about choice -- above and beyond its undeniable instrumental value -- is merely giving a conscious moment of assent to the way that the world is, which need not be the way we chose, or would have chosen, it to be. We need at times in our lives to endorse things as they are, to make peace with what is and what perhaps cannot be otherwise. We want to feel that it is all right somehow that our lives are as they are -- that their being as they are makes some kind of sense. So when a tragedy happens to us, we look, if we are spiritually inclined, for some reason to believe that it was God's choice. And when we face our own lives, bereft of God, we look for some reason to believe that the central occurrences in these lives result from our choice.

I am reminded here of my first experience with having my work published. I stared at the pages returned from the editor,

and I could not bear, simply could not bear, to see someone else's words, in an unfamiliar hand, written upon my page. Some of the suggestions might doubtless be improvements, but to me they brought home the story of one of the Wyeths, who reportedly destroyed his painting after his father added one brushstroke to it: "It is no longer my own." So what I did, to make myself able to bear the editor's alterations, was to erase each suggestion and painstakingly write it in, in my own handwriting.

This is how the infertility story feels to me: my friend wants to construct a narrative of her own life that makes sense to her, that seems to grow out of her own choices, even though she has not been given the opportunity to make the choices she would most have wanted to make. The graduate student story has less of this flavor -- here I think the instrumental value of choice plays the greatest explanatory role. But the student also wants to feel good about his choice of where he goes to graduate school; it isn't the best graduate program in the country but at least, for his purposes, it is better than someplace else, and someplace else that he might actually have attended.

What we want from choice, I am suggesting, in addition to its instrumental value, is its contribution to what we might call narrative authenticity. We want not so much to write our own life stories, for we cannot, to any great degree, but to tell our own stories.¹⁸ Even those who do not consciously view their

lives in terms of story want to be able to reflect back upon their lives and understand them in a way that makes some fundamental sense, that gives their lives some unity, some meaning. Ursula Hegi ends her novel Stones from the River as her protagonist, Trudi, a dwarf in Nazi Germany, whose lover has been killed in the Dresden bombing, meditates on just this task, of telling her own story, and the story of her family, and of her village:

It was as though every story she had ever told had brought her to this moment, to the story that would tell itself through her. . . . What she could offer Georg was far more than what had happened -- a certain sequence that would lead him to the core of the story, a story that would hold an entire world. It had to do with what to tell first -- though it hadn't happened first -- and what to end the story with. It had to do with what to enhance and what to relinquish. And what to embrace.¹⁹

Even when they are not moments in which we can profoundly affect the future of the world, or our own future, moments of choice are moments at which we consciously and deliberately relinquish and embrace. They are central moments for us as we engage in the ongoing enterprise of giving meaning to, and making sense of, the stories that are our lives.

Notes

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1. Here I should concede that we can choose certain features of our children. In choosing to have a biological child with my partner, I choose to have a child with with these two specific sets of genes, whereas adoptive parents do not have this choice: their child will be created from any of a billion genetic possibilities. Adoptive parents, on the other hand, sometimes may explicitly choose to have, or not to have, a child of a certain gender or (risk of) handicap. These parents come closer to knowing (and so choosing) who their child will be, or, perhaps, what he or she can't be. But for both biological and adoptive parents, the child's own distinct identity is bound to come as an almost complete surprise.

2. Thomas Hurka, "Why Value Autonomy?" Social Theory and Practice 13, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 361-82.

3. Gerald Dworkin, "Is More Choice Better Than Less?" in The Theory and Practice of Autonomy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 62-81.
4. Hurka, p. 362.
5. Ibid., p. 364.
6. Ibid., p. 374.
7. Ibid., p. 375.
8. Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
9. Ibid., p. 375.
10. I owe this example to Ann Davis.
11. Raz, p. 373.
12. Ibid., p. 374.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 376.
15. Similar issues arise in the vast literature on coercion, as it can be argued that when I give my wallet to the robber, I exercise choice (because I could refuse to do it), or that in this case I have no real choice, because the alternative is sufficiently unattractive that no one could rationally choose it.
16. On this point, see Alan Wertheimer, "No Choice," Chapter 11 in Coercion (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).
17. Ibid., p. 194.

18. And also to edit them to some limited degree: at least to change the that's to which's and the which's to that's.

19. Ursula Hegi, Stones from the River (New York: Scribner, 1994), p. 525.