

—, Renata Salecl

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
 I took the one less travelled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost,

Deciding on 'the road less travelled' sounds like a brave idea – it epitomises the ideology of risk-taking, of standing alone and heading down the solitary path. Yet the road not taken will continue to haunt us. To resist the nagging doubt, we spin out a story, a narrative, to support the choice we made, recalling portents and distinguishing features of the options we had. But in fact, as with Frost's two similar tracks in the wood, we may have seen no difference at the time.

The choice that presents itself to an existential being in the twenty-first century is a choice between two very similar-looking paths. The fact that a choice of such apparent slightness can have vast repercussions is what makes us anxious. Everything depends on a seemingly chance turn, even though we may subsequently tell the story of bold choices made in situations where foresight, in truth, was impossible. Through a compensatory, selective act of memory we generate the idea of a 'road less travelled'. It lends an element of heroism and forbearance to a course of action that may have been taken casually at the time. And it lends glamour to the path not taken. We can ease our unhappiness with what is and what was by summoning thoughts of what might have been. A source of real despair lies in the thought that there might have been nothing for us but boredom and discontent, no matter which road we took. This is a thought,

incidentally, that comes closer to the Calvinistic sense of doom that haunted Robert Frost.

Impossible choice

If Frost's poem is about a curiosity concerning what might have been if another choice had been made, together with a tinge of regret over the loss of this possibility, today, at the start of the twenty-first century, people often deal with the impossibility of making any choice at all. When there are so many options to choose from, when choice becomes so overbearing, and when the responsibility for making the wrong choice appears so anxiety-provoking, foundering in indecisiveness seems to offer protection from the possible regret and disappointment that choice might provoke. Unlike Frost's man in the woods, today's individual is facing not simply two roads to choose from, but a crossroads where many roads meet. When there are so many possible directions to take, and when it is so important to take the right one, the individual can endlessly procrastinate, seek more and more information about the various options and, in order to preclude the possibility of failure, never make up his mind at all.

Faced with an overwhelming array of possibilities, people find thousands of ways to avoid making choices. In a book provocatively titled *Should You Leave?* the American psychiatrist Peter D. Kramer shows how people deal with choices related to their love lives.³ Anyone who has ever been in a long-term relationship