

REBECCA SOLNIT'S MIRROR

I've been laughing my ass off at the number of lefties who have linked to—or republished—this Rebecca Solnit piece scolding her “dismal allies” for being such grumps.

It's not so much I mind someone trying to persuade progressives of the importance of voting for Obama in November. Solnit acknowledges that Obama has done some horrible things and recognizes the dilemma that might present. And as a swing state resident, I'm used to blue state residents imploring me about the importance of my vote. I've always weighed the responsibility of living in a more closely contested state seriously and in 2004 worked many many hours to elect a John Kerry I believed was a problematic choice. Solnit appears not to realize it (allowing one of her interlocutors from NV to equate voicing this dilemma with actual voter suppression, which is after all, a real thing that involves affirmative attempts to make it hard for people of color to vote), but we lefties in swing states actually do think about this stuff and weigh it seriously. It is fair to try to persuade us that voting for Obama is a better choice than not voting or voting third party.

It's just that I'm stunned that anyone—particularly people who work with words—could imagine Solnit's piece effectively accomplishes her goal.

This is a piece the 7th word of which is “briefly” that doesn't wind down for another 2,765 words. It's the 6th paragraph before Solnit gets around to providing an example of her complaint, and before you get there, you have to wade through vacuous language like, *“There are bad things and they are bad. There are good things and they are good, even though the bad things are bad”*—italics original.

By the time readers have gotten to the moral of Solnit's story,

Every minute of every hour of every day you are making the world, just as you are making yourself, and you might as well do it with generosity and kindness and style.

She has called or implied her audience is "dismal," "rancid," "Eeyore," "snarky," "poison[ing]," "sour" "complainers," "kvetchers," "caustic," "pile of bile," She accuses her audience of "bitch[ing]," "pound[ing] down," "habitual[ly] tearing down," engaging in "recreational bitterness." She disdainfully labels the "lesser of two evils" metaphor a cliché, but then informs her readers that, "when you're a hammer everything looks like a nail"—and that's just one of her many clichés. And all that's before she accuses her audience of asking that "Che Guevara give them a spa pedicure." She calls other people snarky?

Given the way she attacks her audience, I find it hard to believe that Solnit didn't see the irony when she suggests we "thrive in this imperfect moment [] through élan, esprit de corps, fierce hope, and generous hearts."

And then there are Solnit's details. She repeatedly implies that she "already know[s] most of the dimples on the imperial derriere." But that's not always clear. Three times she suggests Obama's re-election is about access to health care; just once does she get it right that it's about access to insurance. And here's the complaint—the one that first shows up in the 6th paragraph—that appears to have set her off:

Recently, I mentioned that California's current attorney general, Kamala Harris, is anti-death penalty and also acting in good ways to defend people against foreclosure. A snarky Berkeley professor's immediate response began, "Excuse me, she's anti-death penalty,

but let the record show that her office condoned the illegal purchase of lethal injection drugs.”

Apparently, we are not allowed to celebrate the fact that the attorney general for 12% of all Americans is pretty cool in a few key ways or figure out where that could take us. My respondent was attempting to crush my ebullience and wither the discussion, and what purpose exactly does that serve?

Not only does Solnit seem to misunderstand what has happened on the foreclosure front, but she also projects motives onto a guy who appears to have insisted on measuring Harris by her deeds, not her words. Was he really “attempting to crush Solnit’s ebullience”? Does she have evidence to that fact? Can she—someone who writes for a living and in this piece demands that people “describe [this political system] and its complexities and contradictions accurately”—really not imagine that this guy was simply providing precisely that complexity?

Along with her ironic call for generosity and kindness, Solnit also suggests people consider how they’re engaging in this movement.

ask yourself just what you’re contributing, what kind of story you’re telling, and what kind you want to be telling.

Solnit might ask herself these same questions. Indeed, she might take a lesson from Obama, a master story-teller. Rather than attacking the students and Latinos and struggling workers whose enthusiasm had waned—a strategy Solnit apparently shares with Mitt Romney—Obama has told stories about kids getting insurance coverage and students getting Pell grants and factory workers working longer hours again. Given the increased enthusiasm among his base,

those stories appear to have worked like a charm.

But rather than tell those kind of stories, Solnit has opted for precisely the kind of attack she criticizes.