

# Academic Perceptions of Abortion: A Review of Humanities Scholarship Produced Within the Academy

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What do my colleagues in humanities say when they write about the right-to-life issues? This was the question I posed for research to be presented at this year's annual conference of University Faculty for Life. Hopefully, within the following pages the answers I provide will prove satisfactory. Here is my perspective on the state of the scholarship—at least in humanities—on right-to-life issues.

The methodology for this year's paper was simple. I wanted to focus on recent scholarship in the humanities dealing with the three right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. A few items from recent scholarship came to my attention from a variety of sources (such as email lists from pro-life groups in Canada and the United States). However, virtually all of the monographs published since 2000 that I thought would pertain to the life issues were advertised in recent issues of *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, the official publication of the premiere organization for scholarship in the humanities.

The clause “which I thought would pertain to the life issues” indicates that, sometimes, I was led to “dead ends.” Thanks to the immediacy of email, I could obtain responses from the authors themselves in order to ascertain whether their works concern abortion. For example, I thought that *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, a 2001 monograph edited by Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee, would certainly concern abortion. Finucci emailed to say that

“it does not, although there are a few references.” Similarly, I thought that Laura Frost’s 2002 monograph *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* would definitely concern abortion, but Frost emailed to say that “My book doesn’t address right-to-life issues or any related reproductive issues. I focus on fantasy and sexuality/eroticism in literature.” Tamar Katz also responded by e-mail to say that her 2000 monograph, *Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England*, “doesn’t discuss abortion.” Nancy J. Peterson’s 2001 monograph, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory*, “discusses history, not abortion.” Michelle Lise Tarter confirmed that the 2001 monograph that she edited with Janet Moore Lindman, *A Centre of Wonders: the Body in Early America*, does not concern abortion at all. “I don’t think that any of the essays actually approaches this topic of abortion,” she notes. “There is one essay on Elizabeth Emerson (Hannah Duston’s sister), but the issue of abortion is not actually discussed.” Finally, Elizabeth A. Wheeler also replied that her 2001 monograph, *Uncontained: Urban Fiction in Postwar America*, does not concern abortion.

Perhaps the problem in identifying abortion passages in current scholarship is one of indexing. For example, in her 2001 monograph, *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis does “treat one poem by Mina Loy that in passing mentions abortion.” It is not indexed in the book. The chapter concerns representations of sexual intercourse in literature, and is entitled “‘Seismic Orgasm’: Sexual Intercourse, Its Modern Representations and Politics.”<sup>i</sup>

Thanks to the Ohiolink interlibrary loan system, which includes virtually all of the libraries of public and private colleges and universities in Ohio, I was able to obtain many of the titles I wanted to review. Having obtained these, I quickly determined that the focus of scholarship on the life-issues was restricted to the first life-issue, abortion.

My critique of some scholarship will primarily concern the absence

of discussion of the right-to-life issues in areas where, in my estimation, the scholarship should have addressed the issues or would have been more comprehensive if the right-to-life issues were addressed. Towards the end of my research, I decided that I would contact the authors themselves, asking them questions about their presentation of material—or lack thereof—on the right-to-life issues. Finally, I will consider whether ideas from recent scholarship can be used to help students as they study a representative passage of contemporary literature.

When I reviewed the draft of this paper, the idea came to me that what I would present could be classified into three facetious categories: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The “good” section will consider recent scholarship that is not hostile to right-to-life interests or persons but presents material that right-to-lifers can use in the classroom in order to support claims made since the founding of the movement. The “bad” section discusses recent scholarship whose hostility to right-to-life interests is obvious. The “ugly” section consists of the application of some ideas from recent scholarship to that representative passage of contemporary literature that I referred to in the previous paragraph. I do not mean to say that Juliana Baggott’s poem “Seventy Degrees in December” is ugly. On the contrary, I contend that the application of some ideas from recent scholarship itself creates an ugly interpretation of literature.

#### REVIEW OF SELECTED HUMANITIES LITERATURE

Although academic discussion of the international effects of the first right-to-life issue of abortion is rare in recent literature,<sup>ii</sup> academics delving into the experience of the United States have much to say. Paradoxically, some academics have contributed to the abortion “discussion” by what they have omitted as much as by what they have written about the subject.

Nancy Bauer’s 2001 monograph *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy & Feminism* continues the trend in recent scholarship to investigate the

ideas of one of the most important women in the twentieth century. Bauer provides extensive footnote commentary on Beauvoir's attitude toward children and abortion. After documenting Beauvoir's commitment to abortion, Bauer writes:

Beauvoir was notorious for her own horror of having and caring for babies. But in interviews, especially toward the end of her life, she was at pains to insist that her own lack of desire to have children did not play a role in her admonishing women to consider carefully the possibility of opting out of motherhood. Tellingly enough, Beauvoir warned that, given the demands placed on mothers in our culture, having children frequently constituted for women a form of slavery.

When asked, for example, by Yolanda Patterson in 1985 what advice she would give to women who wanted both to have children and to "maintain their own identity and independence," Beauvoir said, "One must really follow one's deepest desires. Otherwise one feels unfulfilled.... But one should be very careful not to become enslaved." And in an interview (one in a famous series) with Alice Schwarzer in 1976, she said: "I think a woman should be on her guard against the trap of motherhood and marriage. Even if she would dearly like to have children, she ought to think seriously about the conditions under which she would have to bring them up, because being a mother these days is real slavery." (p. 274, ellipsis in original).

In this respect, Bauer is continuing the research by Germain Kopaczynski that documents the emergence of abortion in Beauvoir's work as coming to have an importance that is based on faulty readings of Catholic ethical positions.<sup>iii</sup>

While Beauvoir was writing in France, in the United States a new label was given to those writers who were reacting against the tenets of postwar American life: the Beat Generation. Most of the major writers of the Beat Generation are associated with the culture of the 1950s. Many pro-lifers may associate the Beat generation with support for abortion on the assumption that any reaction against middle-class American values from the 1950s would obviously include abortion. Since this decade is often cited as the one that Beat writers in the 1950s and 1960s reacted

against, one would expect to find some support for the overthrow of the right-to-life among Beat writers. Ann Charters's 2001 monograph *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* is fascinating because it does not establish this connection between an admittedly radical group of writers and an attack on the right to life.

One chapter is especially noteworthy for what it does not say about abortion, for Charters herself confirms in an e-mail response that "abortion isn't addressed" in the monograph. Entitled "Panel Discussion with Women Writers of the Beat Generation," Charters leads a discussion with "a panel of so-called Beat chicks," women who were involved in the Beat movement not only as writers themselves but as spouses or lovers of male Beat writers such as William Burroughs, Alan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Although she credits Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as "the most influential book in radicalizing American women readers" (p. 612), Charters claims that

We women wanted marriage too. Our sexual freedom came at a high price in the 1950s, when most men respected a woman only if she was somebody's wife.... Although we were in rebellion against what we considered our second-class status in American society, we still respected marriage. Ironically, at the time we thought it was the final proof of our independence. A wedding ring was a visible sign to an uncaring world that we weren't immature or irresponsible or unstable, that we had accomplished something of value on our own. (p. 613)

In the course of the interview other panelists speak of feminism and liberation only in vague terms. For example, Joyce Johnson suggests how radically different the Beat chicks were from their 1960s second-wave feminist sisters:

In the late fifties, it was an enormous thing for a young woman who wasn't married to leave home, support herself, have her own apartment, have a sex life. This was before the pill, when having sex was like Russian roulette, really. It wasn't the moment *then* to try to transform relationships with men. Just to get your foot out the door into the world as an independent person was just such an

enormous thing. (p. 629, emphasis in original)

According to Johnson, Jack Kerouac “had a horror of the idea of bringing life into the world because he had seen a child die, that child being his brother” (pp. 630-31). That is the closest one comes to finding a passage that can be construed in any way as being anti-child. The final panelist whom I will mention, Joanna McClure, stated: “I didn’t join the women’s movement, but I did my personal part in creating freedom for myself” (p. 630).

Sara M. Evans’s essay “Sources of the Second Wave: The Rebirth of Feminism,” published in the 2001 monograph *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*, has a much more activist section entitled “Making the Personal Political.” While it is common knowledge that “consciousness-raising groups were seed-beds for what grew into diverse movements around issues ranging from women’s health, child care, violence, and pornography to spirituality and music” (p. 201), Evans exemplifies this connection between such feminist groups and abortion:

As groups analyzed childhood experiences for clues to the origins of women’s oppression in relations with men, marriage, motherhood, and sex, discussion led to action, and action on one topic led to another. For example, in an early meeting of New York Radical Women, several women described their experiences with illegal abortions. For most it was the first time they had told anyone beyond a close friend or two. The power of this revelation, however, contrasted sharply with the current debates surrounding proposed liberalization of the abortion law in New York, which were conducted with clinical detachment. (pp. 201-02)

The one paragraph in her essay that is solely devoted to abortion is worth closer examination. After discussing the disruptions of legislative activity on abortion, Evans writes:

With this and numerous other actions and demonstrations women’s liberation groups made themselves the “shock troops” of abortion rights, joining an already active abortion law reform movement. For the most part, they sought to

intervene directly, offering services, public education, and assistance to women rather than lobbying for reform. In Chicago, a group within the Chicago Women's Liberation Union called "Jane," which began doing counseling and referrals in the late 1960s, shifted in 1971 to performing abortions themselves. Between 1971 and 1973, Jane performed eleven thousand illegal abortions with a safety record that matched that of doctor-performed legal abortions. (p. 202)<sup>iv</sup>

What is striking about this section is the absence of discussion about the growth of pro-life alternatives during this same period. Birthright and other pregnancy support groups experienced phenomenal growth in the 1960s and 1970s, in part to help meet the demands of mothers who chose to give birth instead of have an abortion.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, judicial and legislative efforts to retain protective measures are ignored.<sup>vi</sup>

Kevin M. Crotty's 2001 monograph *Law's Interior: Legal and Literary Constructions of the Self* has several interesting points to make about legal constructs and the language of rights. Crotty discusses the thinking of many prominent theorists whose works had an impact on legal thinking about abortion. The twentieth-century philosopher John Rawls and the legal theorist (and now federal judge) Richard Posner have profoundly affected their respective disciplines. Crotty critiques some aspects of their thinking *vis-à-vis* individual rights, the freedom of the individual, and abortion. Stanley Hauerwas had already argued against the application of Rawls's philosophy in his chapter on abortion in the 1981 monograph *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (pp. 216-17 especially). While not expressly updating Hauerwas's research, Crotty does elaborate two decades later some of the ideas mentioned in Hauerwas's work. For example, when discussing Rawls's concept of "public reason," Crotty suggests that "instead of sealing off public debate from intractable problems, the boundaries Rawls envisions may make the debate even more bitter and divisive, for these public terms seem to predetermine the result and to silence opposing voices before the fact" (p. 37). It should be obvious that pro-lifers can use this line of argument to demonstrate how various levels

of political correctness—whether in the humanities, law, or other disciplines—have attempted to silence their own voices.

Similarly, Crotty points out potential problems in Posner’s thinking that pro-lifers can use to their advantage. Posner “develops the line adumbrated by Holmes [that ‘the man of the future’ will be ‘the social engineer, not the legal expert versed in the letter of the law’], and argues that law should be a relatively unselfconscious, ‘transitive’ tool for bringing about rational outcomes” (p. 153). However, according to Crotty, when Posner’s argument involves abortion, recent twentieth-century decisions by the Supreme Court such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) indicate that such rational development is frustrated. Specifically, if “the normative question of women’s reproductive rights—or the connection between women’s autonomy and legislation outlawing abortion—does not play a major role in his argument” (p. 153), then what, in Crotty’s estimation, does?

After *Brown* and *Roe*, any concept of rights, if it is to be really plausible, must be responsive to the physical aspect of citizens as beings with a race and gender.

By confronting the Constitution with the sexuality of its citizens, for example—a reality that had previously been obscured or marginalized in law—*Roe* requires considerable adjustment to the legal image of ourselves as simply rational and autonomous. It points to a more complex model that situates rationality within a personality that both promotes and undermines it. Naturally, a vision of the human being as deeply sexual and therefore partly irrational is hardly a surprise in a post-Freudian era.<sup>vii</sup> The point is that *Roe* made sexuality relevant to an understanding of the Constitution and the political community it structures. (p. 192)

The implications of such a philosophy are clear for Crotty:

As in *Brown*, autonomy emerges from *Roe* as something partisan and contested.

The majority opinion in *Roe* struck down the abortion laws at issue in the name of privacy, and in the interests of keeping the government out of necessarily intimate decisions. But preventing states from legislating against abortion did not secure state neutrality. First, by assuring women control over their

reproductive functions, *Roe* leveled the playing field for males and females in the public sector. It also modified the family's internal dynamics on the interests of securing individual autonomy: parents, for example, cannot use law to veto a minor's decision to have an abortion. More deeply, by holding that states could not take away from women the ability to choose, *Roe* made it likelier that women would be autonomous individuals able to govern their own lives rationally. In other words, *Roe* did not so much respect an independently existing autonomy in woman as help to produce it, and to do so in the face of deep and pervasive social forces that resisted it. It reflects a troubling view of the Constitution as an aggressive force, bringing about the autonomy it presupposes. *Roe* and *Brown*, then, both undermine Holmes's vision of the Constitution as facilitating debate, but existing essentially independent of it. The Constitution, as construed in these cases, is necessarily partisan—immersed in the political fray, and struggling to bring about its own version of the good. (p. 213)

On these premises, criticism of *Roe*, a creation of only about three decades, is not only obvious, but also possible, if only because it is on a collision course with a millennia-old construct of the human condition: the family. Crotty states:

*Roe* replicates in a highly sophisticated latter-day setting the conflict between state and household that drove (for example) the *Oresteia*, in which a legal system was based on the denial of the woman's role in procreation. The state stands for equality, generality, and legality, while the family embodies specificity, hierarchy, and authority. The citizen has a certain fungibility, for (s)he is conceived abstractly—that is, apart from the concrete particulars that constitute the individual identity of the person within the household. The citizen, too, has a certain atemporal quality: young and old citizens, *qua* citizens, are equals. The family, in contrast, is deeply rooted in time and change: age is a highly significant difference among its members, and the household is in a continuing process of generation, growth, and decline. (p. 214)

Crotty concludes his criticism of *Roe* by saying that

*Roe* represents the culmination (at least for now) of a development in which autonomy becomes ever more problematic, and increasingly difficult to

reconcile with perceptions of the individuals' vulnerability to circumstance and his or her deeply formative relations with others, above all in the household. (p. 217)<sup>viii</sup>

A practical application of Crotty's criticism of *Roe* will be suggested in the "ugly" section at the end of this paper.

There are many more minor passages that can be culled from current scholarship to assist pro-lifers in the effort to restore the right to life as the first civil right. For example, Claudia Roth Pierpont's 2000 monograph *Passionate Minds: Women Rewriting the World* chastises Anais Nin for the deception with which she wrote of her abortion:

This abortion is shocking to read about. The story that Nin made of it, the celebrated "Birth," begins with the line "'The child,' said the doctor, 'is dead,' and goes on for its five brief pages to describe the agony of a woman stretched on a table, six months pregnant, too weak to push the child from her body and too tender of spirit to be fully willing to push it out, "even though it had died in me" and "even though it threatened my life".... The story was drawn from Nin's diary, and reappeared in elaborated but not substantially altered form...in 1966.... There were many clues in this account to what really happened, but they were easily ignored in the light of Nin's insistent claim to truth.... The convolution of lies and editing and reediting is hard to sort out, and here, still, are the luxuriantly sentimental phrases—"regrets, long dreams of what this little girl might have been," and "the simple human flowering denied to me because of the dream, again, the sacrifice to other forms of creation." This abortion was a sacrifice made to art, and to ensure "my destiny as the mistress, my life as a woman".... In this instance, rewriting her history was probably Nin's best deed for the feminist cause, and her most important lie. For even in an age of hard-won and vulnerable freedoms, the truth we are offered now is recognizably obscene. (pp. 76-78)

Anthony Cunningham's 2001 monograph *The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy* includes commentary on post-abortion grief without unnecessarily criticizing the validity of such a concept, as many anti-lifers have done:

The sense of moral diminishment associated with guilt and shame can sometimes be seen in cases where people feel justified, indeed compelled to do what they do. For instance, studies show that a large percentage of women who choose elective abortion because of severe genetic defects or malformations in second trimester fetuses not only suffer overwhelming grief but often experience feelings of profound guilt and diminished self-esteem. This is so despite the fact that they are convinced their course of action is best for the child and their family. (p. 203)

Cunningham concludes the citation of his sources in a footnote by saying that “Having to aim directly at ending a desired pregnancy can exact a grave toll.”<sup>ix</sup> Unlike other deaths, abortions usually do not attract the same communal recognition and support that mean so much in the grief process” (p. 289).

Finally, Susan Wells’s 2001 monograph *Out of the Dead House: Nineteenth-Century Women Physicians and the Writing of Medicine* can help fill out an important part of nineteenth-century abortion history. If many historians view the effort to safeguard the right to life in the nineteenth century as a male construct, then Wells’s research refutes that premise:

All women physicians knew of Madame Rastell, the New York abortionist.... It had been Madame Rastell’s profanation of motherhood, in fact, that finally determined Elizabeth Blackwell to overcome her repugnance for the body and become a physician. Early graduates of the Woman’s Medical College, writing on such topics as medical jurisprudence and criminal abortion, specified ways of determining whether abortions had been induced and ways of resisting patients’ pleas for help in obtaining one. Rachel Gleason, a water cure physician who, with her husband, ran a popular sanitorium in New York State, told women who came to her for abortions that a woman who married was obliged to accept children as they came, and she disputed their belief in the legitimacy of abortion before “quickening,” when the fetus could be felt moving.... Gleason’s control of her patients’ reproduction was all the more effective because she offered an understanding ear to the transgressor.... Gleason’s account suggests that, while they practiced a conventional range of therapies, women physicians also understood their medical practice as support for, and regulation of, motherhood.

(pp. 32-33)

All of these excerpts from contemporary scholarship can certainly be used to advance the pro-life movement. Now, however, I would like to move on to research that is hostile to pro-life interests.

#### ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP HOSTILE TO THE RIGHT TO LIFE

Susan Friend Harding's 2000 monograph *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* begins my examination of academic opposition to pro-life interests. Commenting on the opening anecdote of Jerry Falwell's 1986 monograph *If I Should Die*, Harding writes:

The feminist image of a woman gaining control over her body and her life through abortion rights becomes *the other victim of abortion*, a helpless girl who is driven to abortion because she has no other way. With a few more strokes of a pen, *If I Should Die* converts another feminist image, that of men opposing abortion rights to deprive women of elemental, bodily equality and liberty, into an image of a born-again male hero rising up in the country of reproducing women, a man-father-Father figure who will save girl-mothers, as well as babies, from the maw of abortion. (p. 188, emphasis in original)<sup>x</sup>

This passage can be interrogated from a pro-life perspective on many levels, the first, of course, being language. One can note Harding's preoccupation with "feminist images"—at least three are identified here. In the first image abortion is defined as "a woman gaining control over her body and her life through abortion rights." Note that "abortion" is not defined, either by a medical definition as the premature expulsion of the fetus before viability or as the termination (as in "ending") of a pregnancy by natural or other means, or even as the killing of an unborn child. I find it curious, too, that Harding has made the overthrow of the first civil right a plural. What other "rights" are involved in abortion besides the court-sanctioned opportunity to have the unborn child killed?

The second image that Harding proposes is that opposition to

abortion is a male practice—and not only simply to be described as a male practice but as a practice “of men opposing abortion rights to deprive women of elemental, bodily equality and liberty.” Harding proposes that we accept several aspects of the *non sequitur* logical fallacy manifested here. Thus, if any man opposes abortion, then he also wants to deprive women of political rights (“liberty”) and of equal opportunity, which is described in such a way that it pertains not only to positions in society (“equality”) but also to their physical integrity (“bodily equality”), which is itself enhanced as being fundamental to their personhood (“elemental, bodily equality”).

One gets the impression that Harding is caught up in the earliest avatar of feminist literary criticism, which was (and still is) preoccupied with the idea that a male-dominated society, encapsulated in the term “patriarchy,” is one that necessarily oppresses women.<sup>xi</sup> The language she uses demonstrates that she highly resents males who are involved in the pro-life movement, so much so that the entire movement itself is reduced to the third image that she excoriates: “an image of a born-again male hero rising up in the country of reproducing women, a man-father figure who will save girl-mothers, as well as babies, from the maw of abortion.” Even the highly connotative word “maw” suggests that the word is suitable because pro-life activism can be equated with a sentimentalized drama.

Susan Ehrlich’s 2001 monograph *Representing Rape: Language and Sexual Consent* continues the academic dislike for pro-life terminology. Although her work is primarily concerned with rape, it is interesting to note the biased use of language in her discussion of the case of Boston abortionist Kenneth Edelin:

That the lexical items designating objects and events in a trial can constitute “potentially important social acts” is convincingly demonstrated by Danet (1980) in her analysis of a Massachusetts trial in which a Boston obstetrician-gynaecologist was charged with manslaughter for performing a late abortion. Focusing on the ways that the prosecution and the defence named and

categorized the aborted entity, Danet illuminates the ideological and strategic significance of such choices: the prosecution consistently used terms such as “baby,” “child” and “little baby boy” whereas the defence used terms such as “fetus” and “products of conception.” In other words, the “war of words” waged in this trial invoked and reproduced more general cultural debates about the “living” status of aborted entities. After all, intrinsic to legal definitions of manslaughter, and arguably a conviction, is the concept of “killing” which presupposes the prior existence of a “life.” (pp. 37-38)

John V. Pickstone argues in his 2000 monograph, *Ways of Knowing: a New History of Science, Technology and Medicine*, that American and British abortion “histories, especially if they are *comparative*, may serve to help us understand the presentation of issues in our present, and the prospects of reaching accommodation, if not agreement” (p. 223, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, Ehrlich focuses on the connotative impact of words in order to destabilize the facts of abortion history. Once again, the use of clear and concise language by pro-lifers is apparently the tool that most irritates anti-lifers.

Ehrlich’s continuation of the assault on pro-life terminology is nothing contrasted with that of Andrea Slane in her 2001 monograph *A Not So Foreign Affair: Fascism, Sexuality, and the Cultural Rhetoric of American Democracy*. While most of this monograph is concerned with cultural studies, Slane continues the assault against pro-life ideas on the opening pages:

Outside the 1996 Democratic National Convention, a lone white man in a suit and tie staged a one-man antiabortion protest. Holding an American flag, he clutched a white baby doll to his chest and waved a black one over his head. As a father figure in a domestic tableau, the man likely wanted to be seen as protecting babies from their bad mothers, who, with the approval of the government, would kill them. (p. 1)

This passage can be critiqued on the same bases as that of Harding’s earlier. First, of course, is the incorrect identification of the pro-lifer as an “antiabortionist.” As long ago as 1987, Faye Ginsburg commented on

the difficulty of using biased language in scholarly material. Studying abortion activists in Fargo, North Dakota, Ginsburg was one of a few scholars who chose to use the terms that pro-lifers use to identify themselves. On the basis of “Malinowski’s axiom that the anthropologist’s task is, in part, to represent the world from the native’s point of view, I have used the appellation each group chooses for itself” (“Procreation,” p. 634).<sup>xii</sup> Slane, however, is concerned not so much about the content of the ideas that the pro-lifer suggests by his actions as much as she is by the gender of the pro-lifer. Obviously, being male makes more of a statement worthy of contemporary critical attention than other aspects of his picketing. The pro-lifer’s attempt at racial equality and patriotism are unremarkable to Slane—at least at this point in her cultural criticism. What is perhaps more disturbing is the presumption Slane makes that the pro-lifer has made a judgment about the mothers who abort: specifically, that they are “bad mothers” and that this judgment, which she thinks that he wholeheartedly adopts, comes from the babies to be killed by their mothers. I know of no pro-lifer who has such a condemning attitude toward mothers who abort. Moreover, Slane may be in one of those scholarly enclaves that sees picketing as the only vehicle for pro-life action, thus eliminating the need to comment on other spheres of activity—legislative, political, judicial, financial, pregnancy support care, and so on—that occupy pro-lifers’ lives.

More important than this image to be explicated by a cultural studies approach is her use of the holocaust metaphor. Slane bristles at the association of the Nazi holocaust and the one occurring in the United States:

The logic of the parallel between Nazi Germany and the United States surely draws in large part on a metaphor of the gigantic human costs of the Holocaust, where state-mandated, scientifically-executed killing is equated with the state-sanctioned legality of elective abortion. This argument of course depends on the equation of the embryo or fetus with the adults and children exterminated in Nazi death camps--a widespread practice in the antiabortion movement.... By

drawing an equation between the murder of millions of Jews and other “undesirables” and abortions, antiabortion advocates hope to succeed in both granting personhood to embryos and casting feminists and abortion doctors as state-sanctioned murderers. (pp. 2-3, 80)

The above quote merges passages spanning eighty pages, and yet they illustrate the consistent vehemence with which contemporary scholarship reacts when faced with the pro-life claim of equality between the two holocausts. It is significant that Slane’s parallelism grammatically lessens the impact of the abortion holocaust. Where the genocides of Nazi Germany are labeled “state-mandated, scientifically-executed killing,” the abortion holocaust in the US is termed “state-sanctioned legality” of elective abortion. The inference should be clear, according to Slane: the various genocides in Nazi Germany were somehow hoisted on the German nation while abortion was simply recognized by the Supreme Court as a matter of the expression of a voluntary choice. Slane is unable to recognize the personhood of the unborn child with the personhood of the victim of the Nazi concentration camps. Commentary has already been given on the inappropriate use of the word “antiabortion”—itself given in tortured and verbose language that should confuse the logical mind. Can one really be an “antiabortion advocate,” that is, one who advocates or supports a position against abortion, or one who is against a position of support, or one who...? Finally, Slane perpetuates the stereotype that pro-lifers attack feminists and abortionists (called euphemistically “abortion doctors”) personally and label them “murderers.” This fear, of course, is one expression of what she incorrectly perceives as an ad hominem attack made against anti-lifers.

APPLICATION OF IDEAS FROM RECENT SCHOLARSHIP TO A REPRESENTATIVE PASSAGE OF CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Juliana Baggott’s 2001 collection of poems, *This Country of Mothers*, contains one poem, “Seventy Degrees in December,” which I have

chosen for the experiment expressed at the beginning of this paper—to demonstrate whether ideas from recent scholarship can be used to help students as they study a representative passage of contemporary literature. Here is the full text of the poem:

1.

We've grown accustomed to death,  
but today in warm wind  
    the leaves clamber  
to return to their limbs—  
not from regret as much as confusion.  
And I am pregnant again.  
This baby I already know,  
    stitching itself  
inside me, something desperate.  
I imagine its birth feet first  
ready to steel itself against gravity.  
My grandmother believes that bees  
are the souls of the dead,  
that dead souls  
    are folded, like eggs  
with cake batter, into the infant body or before.  
Bees dream of the tulip's sweet cradle.  
I pull down a bare limb.  
It is covered  
    with impossible buds.

2.

We never grow accustomed to death,  
    leaves, perhaps  
but not the baby dying in the womb.  
Wasn't I the desperate one, steeling myself

against birth?

My grandmother is here again,  
 this time not with her bees  
 but to tell me Aunt Effie lost one this way too,  
 so long inside her, though,  
 it turned to stone.

I imagine that is the weight  
 that stays in my belly,

a rock child that could fit  
 in the palm of my open hand.

And what of the bare limbs?

Did I expect the impossible buds to bloom?

(Baggott 39-40)<sup>xiii</sup>

A near-parallelism in this poem recalls another parallelism in a more famous poem about another kind of failed pregnancy—Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem about abortion titled “The Mother.” A refrain in Brooks’s poem incarnates the mantra of the post-abortive mother. “Abortions will not let you forget,” the persona says (p. 430). After discoursing on conditions under which the abortion was performed, the reader cannot determine if the last claim of fact in the poem is sincere or not: “Believe me, I loved you all./ Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you/ All” (p. 430). I have asked my students to analyze Brooks’s poem many times; they mostly come away from the poem with the idea that the persona is a mother who willingly aborted the child, ostensibly because of dire economic circumstances. How would my students react, what would they write, if I asked them to do a one-page paper on Baggott’s poem on the condition that they use ideas from contemporary humanities scholarship?

For “fun and games,” here are two sample papers that I suggest would be written. The first will be a paper written by someone in an

institution that values literature more as a means of cultural criticism (naming any university might suffice to meet this criterion). The second will be a paper written by someone in an institution that values literature in three ways: as literature, as literature that can be viewed from a multiplicity of critical perspectives, and as literature that manifests the ancient dictum of Horace that all literature not only pleases but also teaches. Let's say, also, that the student who will write the second paper is a pro-lifer at a community college where, unlike a student at a cultural studies-based university, he or she will be expected to read, write, and think critically and to master certain subjects that may no longer be "privileged" in other institutions—that is, he or she will be expected to master grammar, rhetoric, and research paper production.

#### Paper #1

Obviously, the woman in the poem is oppressed in several ways: first by the fetus itself; second, by all of male society, whose oppressive demands have forced the woman into another, probably unwanted, pregnancy. No man is mentioned in this poem; in fact, the only actors in the poem are women: the woman narrating this poem, the narrator's grandmother, and the narrator's Aunt Effie, who is mentioned as an authority. Male history, or, rather, the male version of history is eradicated; it is the women in the poem who have authority. Therefore, this poem is a celebration of women's voices which have been suppressed for millennia.

Whatever emotional trauma the woman feels for the fetus is a product of centuries of manipulative male ordering of society which we are only now beginning to overcome. Several contemporary authors such as Ewa Plonowska Ziarek have affirmed the importance of our sexuality as a matter which supersedes other social interests. Moreover, we must be aware of how language can be used to distort reality. For example, Susan Ehrlich has argued that language can be used to attempt to hoist humanity on non-beings such as fetuses. Susan Friend Harding and Andrea Slane similarly caution us against falling into antiabortion language traps, which will enslave women.

#### Paper #2

Obviously, the mother is suffering from the loss of her unborn child. First, of course, the title suggests that something is abnormal; it is not normal in this northern climate that December should have such high temperatures. The first stanza continues this motif of abnormality: instead of staying on the ground after they have fallen off the trees, “the leaves clamber/ to return to their limbs.” The impending miscarriage is intimated by the imagery of “a bare limb” and “impossible buds.” The leaves’ wanting “to return to their limbs” may personify the hope that the unborn child could somehow restore him- or herself in the womb.

Although the poem cannot be scanned in a regular pattern, certain phrases seem to read as spondees, suggesting heaviness. For example, the line “Bees dream of the tulip’s sweet cradle” can be scanned so that the first two words constitute a spondee: “Bees dream.” Several similes, metaphors, and personifications help to convey the importance of the loss of the child.

Socially and politically, this poem may have great importance. Unlike many other contemporary literary works, the unborn child is personified as “this baby.” The genderless reflexive pronoun is used twice, but it is used in such a way that the humanity of this child to-be-miscarried is not demeaned: “I imagine its birth feet first/ ready to steel itself against gravity.” Perhaps the use of this pronoun reflects the anguish of the mother who cannot bear to think further that the unborn child is either a son or a daughter. The mother expresses her anguish poignantly as she affirms that “We never grow accustomed to death,/ leaves, perhaps/ but not the baby dying in the womb.”

While many critics hold negative views toward the family (such as Susan Ehrlich and Andrea Slane), others (including Kevin M. Crotty) have recently indicated the importance of the family. In fact, one critic, Anthony Cunningham, suggests that any loss of an unborn child has severe ramifications for the parents. The family relationships of the mother are obscure. While she does refer to some persons in her family who strive to support her (her grandmother, for example), the males in her family are absent. Where is her boyfriend, male partner, or husband?

Finally, this poem can be reviewed through many literary perspectives, for example, psychological criticism, to determine the emotions of the narrator; feminist criticism, to determine how the mother feels oppressed by the loss of the unborn child; or Marxist criticism, to determine the value of the unborn

child who meant a great deal to this mother.

Of course, such a reductionism as the above papers exemplify is meant to prove a point. If students are offered only a biased view of one of the major political and social movements of our time, then they will not only produce papers which are reductionist (once one says that a work of literature can be blamed on oppression of women by men, what is left that's important enough to say?). They will also produce papers which will satisfy the political correctness of the instructor. We are well aware of the so-called liberal bias of academics. A recent online article carried by LifeSite News from Canada mentions, for example, that "a poll of Ivy League university professors in the U.S. has found that only one per cent want a legal ban on abortion" (Westen).<sup>xiv</sup> If an instructor steeps him- or herself only in a biased scholarship—and if that is one which is primarily derived from an anti-life view of the world, then his or her students will suffer not only from lack of objectivity in writing papers designed for academic use but also from a stifling political correctness that will be carried into the world once those students graduate.

Fortunately, once they graduate and realize that various "feminist images" proposed to them are either vapid or false, I trust that these students who have been academically nurtured on anti-life pabulum will switch to our side. Nobody feels comfortable in a condition of living a lie—witness, to her great credit, Norma McCorvey. I hold that pro-lifers are more intellectually honest when it comes to literature discussion. Unlike anti-life academics who may omit pro-life research, we are able to use the best from the bad (anti-life) criticism as well as the best of ancient and modern pedagogy and andragogy. Therefore, we are crucial in academia, for it is our job to see that students are educated not so that they become partisans to anti-life principles, but that they become and remain open to the best that comprehensive humanities research has to offer.

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## NOTES

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i. Although their work does not concern abortion, some scholars think that a study of the first right-to-life issue is needed. For example, Nicholas Dames responded by email that his 2001 monograph, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870*, “contains nothing pertaining to abortion. An interesting possibility, but I can’t think (offhand) of any recent scholarship on the issue” of abortion. Similarly, Edvige Giunta also confirmed in an email that her 2002 monograph, *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors*, does not concern abortion, “though it certainly deserves attention.”

ii. For example, the introduction to the 2000 monograph *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, edited by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood, contains only the

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briefest reference to abortion: “Abortion was the second issue which drew women in their hundreds of thousands in a campaign of information and civil disobedience, and was finally legalized in 1978, thus largely ending a hidden but widely felt scandal” (pp. 8-9).

iii. See, for example, Kopaczynski’s 1994 article “Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*: Laying the Groundwork for Abortion” (*Cithara* 33/2: 18-29). I am especially grateful that Kopaczynski responded to an urgent email query of mine recently, when I sought to determine further the bases of Beauvoir’s support for abortion. In that e-mail Kopaczynski writes: “I have checked the French original; even there, Beauvoir does not give any indication precisely where she got the quote supposedly from St. Augustine.” Beauvoir may have inaccurately tried to recall some material from other works. Kopaczynski suggests that “if it be from St. Augustine, I would opine that the most likely source is his ‘De nuptiis et concupiscentia.’ Another possibility would be from one of his sermons.”

iv. The continuation of this paragraph suggests the source for the abortionists’ version of the right to privacy: “Sarah Weddington, an unemployed law school graduate who belonged to a consciousness-raising group in Austin, Texas, investigated the legal risks of providing an underground abortion referral service. Her research revealed the possibility of a legal challenge to laws against abortion based on the right to privacy” (p. 202).

v. One thinks immediately of Birthright, because, beginning with one office in Toronto in 1968, the organization expanded first throughout the metropolitan Toronto area, then advanced into various Canadian provinces. In 1972 Birthright expanded internationally by opening an office in Atlanta, though the first chartered chapter was established in Chicago. Louise Summerhill, Birthright’s founder, travelled to South Africa in the late 1970s to set up chapters. Birthright was “one of the only volunteer organizations in South Africa which helped whites, coloureds and blacks indiscriminately,” according to the founder’s daughter, Ms. Louise R. Summerhill. By the early 1980s Birthright expanded to a total of over five hundred offices in North America. Moreover, there are numerous other pregnancy service organizations which either modeled themselves after Birthright or expanded services beyond Birthright’s original platform.

In a now-dated 1998 telephone interview, Summerhill estimates conservatively that two million calls were received by Birthright affiliates.

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Birthright now receives 50,000 calls annually through its hotline alone (1-800-550-4900). She also estimates that there are about five hundred affiliates, but the number is constantly changing. There are about seventy affiliates in Canada, 450 in the United States, and others in South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, and Hong Kong. Although Birthright affiliates are not on every continent, Summerhill states that the group has helped women on all continents through various contacts. Finally, since confidentiality is such a strong factor, few records are kept in the offices; thus, Birthright volunteers do not know how many babies were born to women who visited Birthright.

To put closure on this matter, I asked Evans by email whether her work says “anything about counter-abortion groups, such as Birthright.” Her emailed reply was “I deal mainly with the pre-Roe V. Wade era (which means I do not deal with groups like Birthright).”

vi. Research by Jack and Barbara Willke, summarizing legislative activity on abortion, is noteworthy here. Thirty-three states “voted against permitting abortion for any reason except to save the mother’s life” (p. 157). Moreover, these authors note that “In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, pro-abortionists challenged the constitutionality of laws forbidding abortion in most states. In about 1/3 of the decisions, such laws were declared unconstitutional and varying degrees of abortions were permitted. (Most were states that had already legalized abortion[.]) Two thirds of the state courts[,] however, declared existing laws to be constitutional” (p. 157).

vii. In rather lugubrious language Ewa Plonowska Ziarek argues along the same lines in her 2001 monograph *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy*: “If we approach sexual difference as the disappropriative labor of the negative revealing the incompleteness of the subject and the asymmetry of sexual relations, then the possibility of all ethical encounters, including erotic ones, depends not only on embodiment but, more specifically, on the condition of being a sexed subject” (p. 221).

viii. This passage compares with Hauerwas’s 1981 commentary on a claim by Rawls that “the family may be a barrier to equal chances between individuals” (p. 277). Finally, Crotty’s claim about the force of the family’s influence on the individual reflects current sociological and communication theorist definitions of the term. Judy C. Pearson and Paul E. Nelson’s 2000 monograph, *An Introduction to Human Communication: Understanding and Sharing*, 8th ed., defines “family” as “an organized, naturally occurring, relational, transactional

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group, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time” (p. 182).

ix. I do not think a pun was intended.

x. Despite such an overall biased approach towards right-to-lifers, Harding does supply some objective details about pro-life history within the born-again communities. She states that Evangelical involvement in the right-to-life movement can be attributed to “three overlapping stages and venues”: “The first was the...internal debate among evangelical scholars and intellectual leaders that heated up after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.... The second stage, the effort to convert conservative Protestant leaders more generally to a stricter anti-abortion position, was launched in 1975 when Billy Graham convened a two-day leadership meeting to ‘determine a proper Biblical response to abortion-on-demand’...Perhaps the most important event in this second stage was the production and distribution in 1978 of the five-part film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*. The film and an accompanying book with the same title were written by Francis Schaeffer IV and C. Everett Koop....” (p. 191).

xi. See, for example, Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray’s 1997 dictionary of literary terms widely used in the classroom, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Citing the work of French feminist Julia Kristeva, the editors note that it is essential to understand that “feminine or feminist writing that resists or refuses participation in ‘masculine’ discourse risks being politically marginalized in a society which still is, after all, patriarchal” (p. 123). David H. Richter’s 1998 anthology of literary criticism, *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (2nd ed.), begins with the claims that “patriarchal misogyny, the canon, and women’s writing are key issues for the critics” whose writings are represented in the chapter on feminist literary theory (p. 1346).

Since its publication in 2000, another popular summary of contemporary literary theories appears in the anthology *Literature for Composition: Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 5th ed. The editors, Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, William Burto, William E. Cain, and Marcia Stubbs, declare that “Feminist critics rightly point out that men have established the conventions of literature and that men have established the canon--that is, the body of literature that is said to be worth reading. Speaking a bit broadly, in this

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patriarchal or male-dominated body of literature, men are valued for being strong and active, whereas women are expected to be weak and passive” (p. 509).

xii. To her credit, Ginsburg reiterated this axiom in another work on the same subject. In her article “The Case of Mistaken Identity: Problems in Representing Women on the Right,” published in the 1993 collection *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*, Ginsburg affirms that “However divided the field of sociocultural anthropology has become, Malinowski’s axiom—that the ethnographer’s task is to represent the native’s point of view—is still widely accepted” (p. 163).

xiii. I would like to thank Southern Illinois University Press for granting permission to print this poem. For full bibliographic information, please see the Baggott entry in the Works Cited.

xiv. The rest of the online article is worth quoting in its entirety: “The disturbing results of the recent poll by Luntz Research Associates found that 84 per cent of the professors supported Al Gore in the elections, with only 9 per cent supporting President Bush. Only one of five professors attended religious services at least once a week. Forty-eight percent said they rarely or never attended a religious service. Analyzing the data, writer Maggie Gallagher warns, ‘academia has as rigid a hierarchy of status as the military, and a handful of top schools not only set the tone for the nation’s academics, but they also train and influence the next generation of American leaders. Ideological uniformity is dangerous to the primary intellectual mission of any university: the pursuit of knowledge. How much will professors of (look at the list)—government, political science, law, philosophy, social sciences, economics, sociology—overlook and fail to explore if their work takes place in a relatively insular, parochial intellectual community, free from radically competing points of view?’ Zero per cent of the professors polled identified themselves as conservative. Six percent said they were somewhat conservative, 23 percent were moderates, 30 percent somewhat liberal and 34 percent liberal, with a margin of error of 8 percent.”