

European Abortion Novels: Documenting a Fidelity to the Milieu

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Reading anti-life novels produced in the United States can be emotionally debilitating. Forcing oneself to read works of fiction where one knows that the mother will abort and that her lover (rarely a husband) encourages her in the killing makes the goal of reaching the last page (usually well into page four hundred plus) an enervating, masochistic assignment. Moreover, dragging oneself through American infanticide and euthanasia novels where handicapped newborns or the elderly are consigned to a hypodermic death is similarly depressing.

However, plodding through such anti-life works is necessary if I am to make the study of right-to-life issues in fiction my pro-life work. To compensate for the emotional drain, over the past year I developed a mechanism for coping with such negative fiction. When I would finish an anti-life work, I would then read some life-affirming text. Thus, for example, when I finished Paula Sharp's four-hundred page *I Loved You All* (2000), I shook off the negativity of that novel's world by reading Charles Dickens's eight-hundred page *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837).ⁱ

After completing Dickens's novel, I realized that something was missing from Sharp's novel which was evident by the concluding chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*. Perhaps it is what I suggested at last year's conference: a sense of a satisfactory conclusion, a catharsis of emotions, or what Formalist critics have called the principle that the literary work has achieved a sense of unity. Wouldn't it be great if all novels end like one of the nineteenth-century masters? If at the novel's conclusion, all problems

are resolved; where the men are happily married—with women, by the way, or *vice versa*; and where a Pickwickian character spends the remainder of his or her days enjoying the children of those whom he has loved throughout his life? A Formalist critic's delight!

Then I noticed something else about the list of authors whose works I enjoyed. Dickens is British. Other authors I have enjoyed, such as Carlos Fuentes who wrote *Christopher Unborn* (1987) or Graham Swift who wrote *Waterland* (1983), are foreign, that is, not American. These authors—and others yet to be identified—write fictional works on abortion which, although the plots do not necessarily end “happy,” do offer the reader a sense not only that the plot has ended satisfactorily but also that the abortion plot fits into the milieu of the society in which the abortion episode is to take place. This respect or, even, fidelity to the milieu is striking in many of the novels, as I will demonstrate later. I define milieu as broadly as historical (and even New Historicist) critics would. Milieu combines the cultural, economic, ethical, historical, political, and religious forces that constitute a society at any given time.

Since I have written about American fiction on abortion many times previously, in this paper I had decided to investigate whether and to what degree international fiction on abortion (that is, fiction not produced in the United States) differs from abortion fiction written by American authors. That focus was much too broad. I quickly discovered that most of the international abortion fiction I encountered was written by Europeans.ⁱⁱ I thus decided to refine my investigation and focus on what makes European fiction on abortion more appealing.

I think the appeal that European abortion fiction has can be attributed not so much to the writer's style or the tone in which the abortion plot is narrated or even the use of highly connotative terms or other stylistic devices. I think that what makes European novels on abortion different from their American counterparts is the incorporation of major historical events that have shaped the writers' countries. In other words, European

writers on abortion are faithful to the milieu in which the works are written.

A further claim must be addressed here. If the matter of fidelity to the milieu has serious implications, then its absence likewise has serious consequences for the fiction. I think that the absence of a sense of history has two effects: the historical conditioning of the European novels on abortion not only raises their literary value but also relegates their American counterparts to an inferior position. Hopefully, the claims I will make about the inherent historical fidelity of European abortion fiction can generate two reactions from you, the readers. First, someone reading this can become inspired to investigate further the qualities which make European fiction on abortion more substantial than American fiction. This further research may thus corroborate my view that European abortion novels have more literary value than American works. Alternatively, my thoughts may inspire someone to refute my claims—an easy thing to do, since the sample of fiction under review is relatively limited—by demonstrating that European fiction is just as depraved as American fiction on abortion.

I have followed three criteria for this study. First, I will concentrate only on abortion fiction which has been translated into English. This criterion is not meant to demonstrate ethnocentrism as much as to admit my ignorance of a thorough knowledge of other languages. Second, the works to be discussed are canonical novels; that is, they are credited with having been major accomplishments in the lives of the individual authors. At necessary portions of this paper, however, I will reference minor works that show how abortion has developed and continues to develop as a theme in European fiction. Third, I have tried to assemble representative fictional works on abortion from a variety of cultures within the European community. The items gathered here have been collated under two constraints—time, as well as my relatively average research skills using

various catalogs and databases such as the Library of Congress, NoveList, and Ohiolink.

Despite the drawbacks of insufficient time and research, I have isolated several representative European works on abortion. The abortion novels to be considered here include: *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) by the French author Louis-Ferdinand Celine; *The Book of Hrabal* (originally published 1990) by the Hungarian author Peter Esterhazy; *Hannah's Diary* (1998) by the Belgian-French author Louise L. Lambrichs; *Nothing Grows by Moonlight* (1947) by the Norwegian author Torborg Nedreaas; *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) by George Orwell; *Waterland* (1983) by the Englishman Graham Swift; and finally *Young Woman of 1914* (1931) by the German author Arnold Zweig. While not all of these works are considered major for purposes of their abortion content, all will be considered in some degree. Although this list has been alphabetized by author's surname, the presentation of the novels will follow a chronological order. Towards the end of this paper I will also address how some European novels have become "Americanized," that is, have lost a fidelity to their milieu. Finally, I will offer some summary comments.

CHRONOLOGICAL REVIEW OF ABORTION AS A THEME IN EUROPEAN NOVELS

For purposes of this paper a retrospective of abortion as treated in European literature must be brief. As early as 1729 Jonathan Swift's ironic "A Modest Proposal" obscures a more serious purpose. Eating the one-year-old babies of poor Irish may not be a serious proposal, but one of the reasons offered for such an outrageous recommendation to alleviate the poverty in Ireland is explicitly pro-life. Swift writes:

There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those

voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of *women murdering their bastard children*, alas! too frequent among us, sacrificing the *poor innocent babes*, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast. (493; italics in original)

Although his proposal is not classified as fiction, the explicit reason for Swift's proposal does show that a concern for fighting against the causes of abortion may be a relatively modern development in European literature.

According to citations in the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for the next several centuries "abortion" maintained its more medical definition of a premature birth, or the expulsion of an unborn child not capable of surviving outside his or her mother. Often it was used metaphorically in this same sense. It would take developments of the late nineteenth century for abortion to be argued in any sense other than the medical. Often, the term was confused with infanticide.

Recent research has demonstrated that abortion was often a subject of concern to some now rediscovered, late nineteenth and early twentieth century women authors. For example, Helen Bradford has discovered a dramatic continuity of an abortion theme in the novels of Olive Schreiner, the white British South African author who wrote *Undine* (1929). Bradford writes that

At a time when the word was taboo, she planned to include it in a subtitle. She included abortion motifs in her texts. One or more references to an induced miscarriage occurs in every novel. She provided at least eleven re-enactments of a woman or a man either wanting a pregnancy terminated, or symbolically or actually doing so. (639)

Perhaps Schreiner's obsession with abortion can be attributed to what we would now identify as post-abortion syndrome. Bradford further writes that, while "there is at least as much circumstantial evidence for a

miscarriage to which she believed she had contributed,” Schreiner’s fascination with abortion was an effort “to exorcize her own hidden agony, a perceived abortion that occurred when she was seventeen, in 1872” (641). Such biographical criticism may help to excavate more abortion-related episodes in literature.

However, despite the casual reference here or allusion there, European fiction seriously addressed abortion simultaneous with the economic catastrophe which spread throughout the world during the 1930s. The decade must have been a fertile one (no pun intended) for authors to investigate abortion as a theme in their novels; three works by major authors can be isolated from this time.

The first major Depression-era novel to address abortion is Arnold Zweig’s *Young Woman of 1914*, which was published in 1931. Although the action of the novel takes place during the First World War, and although it is essentially the love story of Werner Bertin and Lenore Wahl, *Young Woman of 1914* can be considered the first full-length fictional work devoted to the effects of abortion on a romantic relationship. The abortion that Lenore considers after the first fifty pages of the novel culminates in the actual abortion fifty pages later. Fifty pages after this, when Bertin has been sent to the war, Lenore resents that his letters to her say nothing about her abortion. Seventy pages later Lenore’s abortion is called “her little ‘affair’” (226)—and Zweig calls attention to the term by enclosing it in quotation marks. A hundred pages later, at their wedding, Bertin and Lenore realize that “it [the abortion] was fifty weeks ago to the very day” (330). That’s odd, isn’t it? To think about an abortion when you are marrying your beloved? When Bertin’s leave from his war duties ends, Lenore’s goal of having something said about the abortion itself ends abortively: she never broaches the subject again.

Surrounding the abortion theme in this novel is an acute awareness of historical developments. Bertin is twenty-six when the novel opens in

April 1915. Bertin and others in the novel think, as most Europeans did at the time, that the war would be over within a year. Lenore is a typical woman of her historical circumstances; she “thought the time had come when, by the passionate worship of beauty, by art and literature, humanity had been raised to a higher level” (Zweig 63). Although both Bertin and Lenore are ostensibly Jewish, Lenore’s religious apathy is indicated more identifiably by the statement “for her there was no comforter, no faith, only the empty heaven of the ordered universe” (68). Bertin’s faith is just as materialistic; he believes in “the bewildering physical facts that first made possible the existence of life upon the earth” (131). Much later in the novel Zweig derides the superpatriots who determined the bases of the war in three episodes.

Perhaps the attention given to the anti-Semitism and superpatriotism of the Prussian ruling classes can be attributed to Zweig himself. Born to a Jewish middle class family, Zweig fled Germany during the Hitler years and lived in Palestine. He returned to East Berlin in 1948. What better person to document the coming horror than the Jewish writer deemed a non-person? Zweig was able to chastise his society by showing the futility of such a catastrophic war. Since the Nazi concentration camps were not operating when the novel was written, the full horror of the effects of such a war and the philosophical foundation of German superiority are shown through the abortion of one child.

The second major novel from the Depression-era to address abortion is the 1932 work by the French author Louis-Ferdinand Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night*. This work is one of the first to include economic reasons for abortion, a feature that later fiction writers will repeat. Celine includes an abortion episode that spans, in the copy I am using, ten pages. At one point in the novel the main character, Bardamu, opens his medical practice in a village distant from Paris. The entire chapter is devoted to exploring the conditions under which French women would undergo

abortions. Bardamu describes the stench of his tenement, which is, appropriately, an aperture into a minor character's discourse about the need for abortion. Madame Cezanne, a concierge in the apartment complex, says:

"Personally," she advised me, "if I were in your place, I'd get pregnant women out of their difficulties.... On the quiet like. There are some women in this neighborhood who live—you've no idea what a life they live! And there is nothing they'd like better than to give you work.... It's a fact. There's more to that than attending to tupenny-ha'penny little clerks with varicose veins.... Especially as it means good pay." (Celine 266)

Another novel which mimics the reasons which Madame Cezanne provides for abortion is *Nothing Grows by Moonlight* by the Norwegian author Torborg Nedreaas, originally published in 1947, fifteen years after Celine's novel. The unnamed narrator who tells her abortion story describes what happens to women with an unexpected pregnancy:

"I wonder if any man can understand what a woman feels while in such a doctor's office, the first time she sits in the waiting room with that particular errand. There she sits, a double offender, quite alone. Yes, a double offender. She has sinned, that's number one. And then she wants the doctor to help her commit another offense. It *is really* an offense.... If she's a maid she risks being fired. If she works in a factory she has to be off work because there is no one to properly care for little children. So women prefer to have it removed, and there are so many women who have to get rid of it you wouldn't believe it." (97-98; italics in original)

The third and final major work from the Depression era addressing abortion is George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). Orwell's novel is unlike the first two novels for two reasons. First, Celine's and Zweig's novels are inherently serious not only in their prime subject matter

(depicting the disillusionment of a young man in post-World War I France or the disillusionment of a young couple in the Kaiser's Germany) but also in the matter of abortion. Admittedly, the abortion motif in Zweig's novel is certainly not secondary, but there is still a seriousness attached to the abortion episode and its consequences.

Orwell's novel, in contrast to these other Depression-era abortion novels, is primarily a novel criticizing the advertising bent of capitalism of his day, and this criticism is often quite humorous. Whatever political critique the novel has is intertwined with the romance between Gordon Comstock and Rosemary Waterlow. Gordon is a frustrated poet; only one hundred and fifty-three of his books have been sold. Gordon is well aware of political currents of his time and considers as reprehensible the only two alternatives to socialism, "suicide and the Catholic Church" (Orwell 110). Gordon, or at least Orwell the narrator, is quite knowledgeable about literature. At one point Gordon realizes that "Time's winged chariot was hurrying near" (262), an appropriate reference to Marvell's seventeenth-century poem "To His Coy Mistress" (appropriate because Rosemary will not "prove" her love for Gordon by having sex with him until they are married). Like Marvell's coy mistress, Rosemary surrenders to Gordon's pressure; she becomes pregnant. Gordon renounces his Marxist principles and hatred of facile advertising slogans when he accepts his paternity and marries Rosemary. With such weighty evidence of political ideology in the novel, it is easy to see that abortion is distinctly a secondary element of the plot.

However, it is the possibility of abortion that leads to the traditional climax of the novel. Rosemary considers having an abortion to solve the difficult economic circumstances in which the young couple find themselves. This possibility leads to the significant change in Gordon's character. Once Gordon identifies with his unborn child, he is literally transformed. Gordon would prefer to follow his own desires, but "there

was the baby to think about” (Orwell 283). Immediately on hearing that he is a father, Gordon does peculiar things. He investigates what an unborn child looks like by studying depictions of the fetus in obstetrics books. Interestingly, the illustrations of unborn babies shock him: the pictures are ugly. Unlike an anti-life character, however, Gordon does not use the ugliness of the fetological development as an argument against the humanity of the unborn child. Instead, Orwell writes that “their ugliness made them more credible and therefore more moving” (Orwell 286). When he renounces his anti-money views and becomes a part of the world again, the narrator reports that Gordon felt simple “relief” (290). Gordon marries Rosemary, they settle into a rather blissful middle-class life, and he is now content writing advertisements for foot odor products.ⁱⁱⁱ

Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) is perhaps the most historically conscious European novel on abortion from recent decades. The abortion that fifteen-year-old Mary undergoes is surrounded by the narrator’s reflections on the meaning of history, of life, and of his place in the world. The actual abortion, which Mary undergoes at the hands of Martha Clay, a reputed witch and abortionist, is not described. What is described throughout the novel is the sense of history interweaving with the events in the lives of the young people. Tom, the narrator, delights in correlating aspects of the French Revolution with what is happening in his life. The historical framing of the abortion in this novel occurs at the very beginning: the Latin word *historia* is defined for the reader. Tom, later a history teacher, recalls how his mother used to tell him stories at bedtime. From this beginning Tom realizes that history is essentially narrative. The New Historicist tenet that all history is merely a revision of past narratives seems appropriate to account for the novel’s writing and rewriting of past events. Often the reader will wonder if the novel is indeed the narration of events in the lives of two English teenagers or a deconstructionist’s effort at just having fun—*jouissance*, which Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray

define as the “attitude of pleasurable playfulness with which practitioners of deconstruction approach literary texts” (184).

Addressing his students, Tom argues:

Children, there’s something which revolutionaries and prophets of new worlds and even humble champions of Progress...can’t abide. Natural history, human nature. Those weird and wonderful commodities, those unsolved mysteries of mysteries. Because just supposing—but don’t let the cat out of the bag—this natural stuff is always getting the better of the artificial stuff. Just supposing—but don’t whisper it too much abroad—this unfathomable stuff we’re made from, this stuff that we’re always coming back to—our love of life, children, our love of life—is more anarchic, more subversive than any Tennis Court Oath ever was. That’s why these revolutions always have a whiff of the death-wish about them. That’s why there’s always a Terror waiting round the corner. (178)

Later, towards the end of the novel, again addressing the children in his school, Tom recapitulates the importance of the French Revolution:

When the children of the French Revolution threw off their tyrannical father Louis XVI and their wicked step-mother Marie Antoinette (who, as it turned out, were only like figures in a puppet show, you could pull off their heads, just like that), they thought they were free. But after a while they discovered that they were orphans, and the world which they thought was theirs was really bare and comfortless. So they went running to their foster-father Napoleon Bonaparte, who was waiting by the old puppet theatre; who’d dreamed up for them a new drama based on old themes and who promised them an empire, a purpose, a destiny--a future.

Children, there’s this thing called civilisation. It’s built of hopes and dreams. It’s only an idea. It’s not real. It’s artificial. No one ever said it was real. It’s not natural, no one ever said it was natural. It’s built by the learning process; by trial and error. It breaks easily. No one ever said it couldn’t fall to bits. And no one ever said it would last forever. (290-1)

What does all this facetious, fairy-tale style rumination on the French

Revolution have to do with Tom's telling us the story of his girlfriend's abortion? Perhaps a major plot development that I left out should be stated here. Although moving *in medias res* (from present time to past events in an English village in the 1930s and 1940s and to the present again), Tom's narration mostly occurs in present time when he is fifty-three years old. His girlfriend Mary became his wife. Since they could not have children (Mary became sterile after her abortion), she does the next best thing and kidnaps a baby. His teaching career is ruined with all the adverse publicity because...because why? Did they not learn a key lesson from history: that negative actions performed in the past can come back to haunt one? Just as the French revolutionists did not succeed with their cataclysmic overthrow of authority, is this novel which can only come out of Europe teaching us that the negative act of abortion will come back to haunt us?

Moving into the 1990s, examples of the interconnection between historical commentary and abortion include two recent European works: Peter Esterhazy's *The Book of Hrabal* (originally published 1990) and Louise L. Lambrichs' *Hannah's Diary* (1998).

Esterhazy's polyvocal *The Book of Hrabal* concerns Anna, the wife of a Hungarian writer and mother of three children, who is pregnant with a fourth, unplanned child. God sends two angels to earth to try to stop the abortion. Determining whether they succeed or not is difficult, probably because the narration is provided by an omniscient narrator, by Anna, by God Himself, by the angels, and also by a limited narrator (perhaps a personification of the author). However confusing the material becomes, while the omniscient narrator comments on the characters or develops one of numerous tangential ideas, he or she also interjects passages narrating episodes from recent Hungarian history. This fidelity to the milieu grounds the abortion question in the novel to historical events of which Americans are largely ignorant: the fall of Hungary to the Communists, the violent crushing of the 1956 rebellion, and subsequent repression of the Hungarian

people until democracy was restored.

One example of Esterhazy's difficult prose can reflect not only the torture of the Hungarian people about whom he writes, but also his fidelity to the milieu of Hungarian society:

If, for instance, we were to count how many among Anna's and the writer's parents and grandparents were beaten by state forces, say since 1919 (to obtain a "more historical" perspective than, say, since 1945), and if we count as a beating the severe police chastisement suffered by the writer's mother in 1957 (shadow punches thrown, being called a whore—a still-life with two spiteful, tired men in a little grey room), we'd end up with six Hungarian individuals who were beaten out of a possible twelve (one parent, and two grandparents on each side), which makes fifty per cent. So then, there are some who were beaten, and some who were not. They beat up everyone, every family; there is no street, no house in Hungary they did not hit.... If this much horror and infamy was visited upon one family ("Your uncle was executed today"), then how many went down in all? And who keeps count? I do, said the writer, resolved to be emotional, for it was his lot to recall everything and everyone; his mother's memory was in his keeping, and so was his father's, whether he wanted it or not, and his brother's, all.... (20-1)

A similarly critical and lengthy paragraph about Communist corruption and violence against persons occurs a mere twenty pages later.

As with Graham Swift's extensive rumination on the French Revolution, what does this excursion into historical criticism of Hungarian society have to do with abortion? Why does it frame the debate which Anna has with herself about whether to abort this fourth child? I can only venture this guess: that the abortion which Anna contemplates is as abusive as what Hungarian political powers—whether post-World War I or after the Communist takeover of the country—committed against the people. Does she have the abortion? Does the novel end "happy"? Granted, Anne seems ambivalent about the abortion. At one point she wants "to abort this baby, *just a little*" (116; italics in original). However, there is evidence

that Anna has learned something about the tragedy from Hungarian history.

When she meets with a near-deaf doctor for the purpose of seeking an abortion, he misinterprets her desire. She in turn interprets this miscommunication by saying, “We have received the sign, and oh, what joy in our humble abode! The old, deaf doc, that’s the sign. The one we’ve been waiting for. In which case it’s all right. It’s OK. We have been shown. Shown the way. The Word cited” (123). One of the angels whom God sends to earth to evaluate this situation states near the novel’s end that “The infanticide, you should excuse the expression, she just barely avoided (with a little help)” (139).

The second of the more contemporary European abortion novels from the 1990s, and the final one I will discuss in this section, is Lambrichs’ *Hannah’s Diary*, which consists solely of diary entries. This novel concerns an abortion that the diarist, Hannah Perier, had in 1943, the psychological effects of which lasted until shortly before her death. The story of Hannah’s aborted baby girl does not end with her abortion: Hannah dreams of her throughout the years. Hannah “raises” her through the stages of girlhood and adolescence. Hannah states: “I have worked out that each time my dream showed her at the exact age she would have been if she had lived” (Lambrichs 49). Louise (is it coincidence that the name of the aborted child is the same as the author’s?) does all the normal things that a little girl and teenager would: she has birthday parties; she goes to school; she gets sick. Hannah keeps the existence of Louise secret, even from her husband. One effect of the abortion is that Hannah is unable to sleep soundly; she sees numerous doctors to try to cure her sleep disorder. One doctor finally does cure her rather simply, just by letting her talk. Hannah confesses not only her abortion, but also Louise’s existence to him. Immediately on this confession, Hannah’s psychological health is restored and she no longer needs to dream about Louise.

This novel would be an ordinary one about what we would identify as

post-abortion syndrome of a French mother were the novel not interlaced with commentary about the historical situation in France from the Second World War to 1981 when Hannah dies. It is because the novel is, as I claim, faithful to its milieu that *Hannah's Diary* is not merely another abortion novel, this time with some interspersed French vocabulary. Hannah gives us much evidence to show that she is faithful to the milieu. Originally, her husband Robert cites the milieu of occupied France as sufficient reason for an abortion. After the abortion, however, Hannah questions the validity of such a claim: "What sort of a world are we living in...if men can voluntarily turn into the butchers of their own children?" (17). She reflects on the importance of what one should learn from history:

One would learn not to trust political speeches that claim to be based on history instead of on moral values. Hitler would never have come to power if someone had cut out of his speeches all the so-called historical arguments he stuffed them with. (52)

Hannah's abortion becomes a basis for questioning her own life: "Can something as commonplace as an abortion really change a women's [sic] life for good? What then can one say about the war, the atrocities that everyone around me has been through?" (99). Perhaps the most philosophical statement in the book occurs when Hannah reflects that

People do not kill because they hate other people[;] they kill to avoid killing themselves, because they hate themselves. Murder, in mankind, in every nation, is the last defence against suicide. But the more they kill, the less they can bear themselves, and that is how wars carry on and never stop. (144)

This reflection written in her diary in 1948 stems directly from her ruminations on the abortion she had five years earlier. I cannot imagine any statement from an American novel on abortion which could be as

grand philosophically as Hannah's insight.

“AMERICANIZATION” OF EUROPEAN ABORTION FICTION

European fiction seems to exist within a framework counter to that within which American literature exists: a sense of history. Certainly, this is no substantial historical epiphany for literary critics.^{iv} “Europe” is an accumulation of ethnic groups that traversed a land area approximating the contiguous United States for three millennia. However, where the combined history called Europe is calculated in millennia, the history of the United States is marked merely in centuries. The European invasion of North America began in the fifteenth century, but increased greatly only in the sixteenth; thus, American history can at best consider five centuries of activity from the seventeenth. Europe has a history six times that.

Since I am in a chronological mood, consider the further analogy. If the twentieth century was American, the time in which the American empire rose to worldwide prominence, then the century of American dominance occupied only 3.3% of Europe's history. (If one argues that only the second half of the century witnessed the rise of the United States as a postwar world power, then the percentage drops to 1.6%.)

The above excursion into mathematics could relate to my view of European novels on abortion if I use it as a cultural warrant for a larger claim of value. Since Europe has such an extensive history, fiction from Europe has much more to draw on to stimulate the reader's imagination and to build the author's case. If this principle is true, then a negation could also be true. That is, since America does *not* have as substantial a history, then fiction from America has less to draw on to stimulate the reader's imagination and to build the author's case.

This generalization may account for what I perceive is an “Americanization” of some European abortion fiction. This Americanization accounts for a substantial ethical gap, based in part on ignorance of one's national

history. American fiction on abortion ignores traditional ethical elements in favor of a view of sexuality divorced from religious principles. The twentieth century substituted one of the inalienable rights as listed in the Declaration of Independence, the right “to pursue happiness,” with the “right” to obtain the highest happiness, a mere reduction to sexuality. When the pleasure of sex “fails” and leads to pregnancy, the corollary “right” to abortion must be affirmed. The “contributions” of this American development can be seen in certain postwar novels. This generalization may not hold in all genres and subjects; however, there are some representative European texts which show an Americanization at work.

Alan Frank Keele has an especially perceptive view that the abortion plots in several postwar German novels illustrate the ethical wasteland of their milieu.^v In terms which resemble the universal reach of the definition of milieu, Keele writes that

In [Martin] Walser whatever the logical, ethical, moral, historical, environmental, geopolitical or legal considerations, abortion remains for the heart and soul of human beings, even those without so much as a fragmented ethical code, a primeval form of murder. (233-34)

Keele’s general observation is apparent in a German novel I want to investigate which shows Americanization at work: Martin Walser’s 1957 abortion novel *Marriage in Philippsburg*. At age twenty-four Hans Beumann is a rising star in the Philippsburg community: he is hired by a wealthy industrialist to be the public relations man to promote radio and television interests in the metropolitan area. His secretary is Anne Volkmann, who happens to be the industrialist’s only child. When Anne discovers that her period is two months late, they decide on abortion. Here are crucial lines describing Anne’s abortion:

The doctor’s wife gave her injections. The doctor began to cut out the foetus.

Anne screamed. The anesthetic did not work.

“It will be all right in a minute,” the doctor said. “We have given you a stiff shot.” He was now wearing a dark rubber apron. For three hours he cut and tore about inside her with knives and forceps, bringing out pieces of bloody flesh which he threw into a big white bowl. Now and again he called his wife, who was holding Anne’s head, over to him, showed her a piece of flesh, whispered to her, asked her something or other. She shrugged her shoulders and came back to Anne’s head while he went on with the massacre. If Anne closed her eyes for a second the doctor’s wife would give her a violent slap in the face and say: “What’s the matter with you? Hey you, open your eyes!” She appeared to be very frightened. Then Anne realized that she had not been given an anesthetic at all, that she had to go through it all fully conscious. (Walser 118)

As grotesque as this abortion scene is, it really does not differ from any other typical American abortion scene. What is missing from this novel to make it other than an American production is its fidelity to the milieu which surrounds Germany in the postwar period. Is it proper to interpret authorial intention like this, to say that the author deliberately intended not to include the milieu in his work? I believe so, because there are several examples of missed opportunities to incorporate explicitly historical elements in the novel. (Remember that the novel was written in 1957.)

Early in the novel the narrator intrudes with the following statement: “Fifty years ago people had been as reserved, as taciturn as Anne on the ticklish problems of early life which were yet so very important. And we knew where that had led....” (Walser 23). Moving from “fifty years ago” to “where that had led” would position the reader within the height of Nazi political power, but no mention of that is made. When thinking about the offer of a job with the industrialist, Hans contrasts nineteenth-century revolutionary thought with contemporary life. It is interesting that the first half of the twentieth century is missing. Giving in to Volkmann’s offer of financial security “was a life story familiar enough in central Europe” (57).

This is perhaps the nearest allusion to the political compromise which characterized the pre-war environment. The promotion of television among the populace is seen as an effort to prevent “worse political catastrophes” (79). One of the worst political catastrophes to face Germany, Europe, and the world—Nazism—is not named. A character by the name of Professor Mirkenreuth plays tapes of his radio accounts of war activities with obvious satisfaction. The author notes that “toward the end of the war his reports had been banned and he was transferred to routine duties” (112). Using the passive voice for the verbs hides the agency of the banning, the Nazi military. Finally, Hans reads the notebooks of a suicide victim who talks about the postwar years, but only in the most innocuous terms. Perhaps the omission of these historical elements is what Walser wanted to do, either for the purpose of making the reader work harder to explicate some meaning from the text, or for the purpose of writing as contemporary a novel as possible. In doing so, however, *Marriage in Philippsburg* would be no different than *Marriage in Massachusetts* or *Marriage in Milwaukee*. By omitting the milieu of this novel, Walser gives us a German version of an Americanized novel on abortion which merely contains another grotesque abortion scene.

Certainly, American fiction on abortion does address the past in that the past is usually the time period in which the plot is situated. However, I find it interesting that many American abortion novels are futuristic, as though they must manufacture a sense of history. Of course, we know that the history of abortion in the United States cannot affirm what the Supreme Court did to attack the right to life in 1973. Thus, American fiction writers on abortion have had to use a futuristic setting for their novels, especially if they wanted to attack the right-to-life movement. This may account for the futuristic settings (and wildly biased actions and plots against right-to-lifers) in some anti-life novels, such as Lucy Ferriss’s *The Misconceiver* (1997), which is set late in this century, or Sue Robinson’s *The*

Amendment (1990) and Howard Fast's *The Trial of Abigail Goodman* (1993), both of which are set in an undetermined future.^{vi}

SUMMARY

In a short story originally published in 1948, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon", African-(expatriate) American writer James Baldwin has a main character, an older French man, say:

"I have never really understood Americans; I am an old man now, and I suppose I never will. There is something very nice about them, something very winning, but they seem so ignorant—so ignorant of life. Perhaps it is strange, but the only people from your country with whom I have ever made contact are black people.... Perhaps it is because we in Europe, whatever else we do not know, or have forgotten, know about suffering. We have suffered here. You have suffered, too. But most Americans do not yet know what anguish is. It is too bad, because the life of the West is in their hands." (243)^{vii}

That may have been true in 1948, when the United States was the bastion of democratic freedom. But now? when the United States is the bastion of anti-life forces? What was first proclaimed as unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this city over two hundred years ago has been convoluted to an enumeration which omits the first right, amplifies the second, and glorifies the third when it is equated with sexuality.

Perhaps, then, what European fiction on abortion can teach the world is that the fragility of civilization depends on not forgetting the past. If any European abortion fiction work is faithful to its milieu, then we as readers should be able to progress to a higher level of civilization. We can learn from the historical catastrophes and events which have shaped our world and can then apply what we have learned to our own lives, ostensibly to prevent, if not as great a disaster, then the beginnings of one.

Unfortunately, American novels on abortion do not have the historical breadth of their European counterparts.

European fiction has much to teach this country which is still fledgling by contrast with Europe. A first principle it could learn is to rediscover its past: a past which protected human life, from the moment of fertilization; a past founded on Judeo-Christian articles of faith; a past which corrected abuse against blacks, against women, against Native Americans, and someday against the unborn who had—until five men revoked it in 1973—a right which was guaranteed here in Philadelphia in 1776.

A second principle American writers could learn is that life-affirming events can be incorporated into their fiction. Why should one be ashamed of the efforts of pro-life activists who have set up pregnancy support groups throughout the country? I have only read about pro-lifers protesting in front of abortion clinics. I have never read a favorable narrative about pro-lifers who work hard every day in pregnancy support centers to help mothers, fathers, and their children. Why should one be ashamed of congressional efforts to restore protection of a discriminated group of people who happen to be unborn? Prohibiting funds from going to the abortion group Planned Parenthood is viewed as reactionary by some. Why isn't it seen for what it is, an effort by concerned citizens to prevent hard-earned tax money from going to an organization that supports abortion around the world?

Finally, if European fiction dwells on disastrous historical events which have shaped that continent's history, then American writers will someday have to face a similar disaster which hit their nation: the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 22 January 1973. Up to now, many anti-life American authors have viewed the *Roe* decision as a blessing. Baldwin says that "most Americans do not yet know what anguish is." What can generate anguish? An economic disaster? A catastrophic war? How unfortunate it

would be if these were the only ways that American writers would come to realize how great a disaster the Roe decision was.

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NOTES

i. Sometimes this strategy of balancing a life-affirming work against a life-negating one, or, rather, trying to escape abortion altogether, does not work. I thought that British author Rumer Godden's *In this House of Brede* (1969) was to have been one of those "easy" reading texts where abortion would not intrude into a novel discussing the glories of the monastic life of Benedictine choir nuns. I was wrong. The abortion episode occupies all of three pages, but its presence in this novel is striking. Penny, one of the former employees of the main character, Dame Philippa, announces that she is pregnant and that she is ambivalent about carrying the baby to term. Philippa firmly asserts the humanity and right of the unborn child to be born: "Doctors don't like doing it, even when there are strong reasons. Here there's no reason" (233); "babies do ['upset everything' as Penny says], because they are people from the very beginning" (234). Despite such

encouraging efforts from her former employer, Penny aborts. Later, Penny's husband affirms "'It isn't as if it had been a hole-and-corner business,' said Donald. 'I do take care of her. It was a proper doctor and a nursing home and I took her there myself,' said Donald virtuously" (235).

ii. For the North American continent, since the United States was ruled out of this study, I only had one Canadian abortion title--Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). For Africa, I only had one Nigerian novel, Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994). I was misled into thinking that the 1928 novel by South African writer Olive Schreiner, *Undine*, concerned abortion when it depicts a miscarriage and death of newborns. As for Asian abortion fiction, I understand from Timothy D. Engles, a colleague who has done work on Fae Myenne Ng's novel *Bone* (1993), that Li Ang's *The Butcher's Wife* (1995) "MAY have included this issue somehow." The novel does address abortion only in that the butcher slaughters a sow which is pregnant. Apparently, definite knowledge about the subject matter of abortion in international fiction is rare.

iii. Gordon's respectful attitude toward his "ugly" unborn child contrasts markedly with most anti-life American fiction. For example, an abortion clinic worker in Norma Rosen's *At the Center* (1982) eradicates serious thinking on the humanity of the unborn child when she explains to another clinic worker how it was that Eve had the first abortion: "The first baby we know was Cain. No spiritual giant. My guess is Eve aborted him before full term, upset as she was by the move from Eden.... So poor Eve was made to feel guilty, and she aborted, probably. Interruption of the eighteen-month term. And who knows what forms it might take? First it's a fish and then a frog or a bird or a reptile or any of those early forms before it's what we call a baby. Well, then, maybe after it's a baby it's meant in its next nine months of development to turn angel (the bearer would feel lighter!). Then after wing-molt, maybe Devil-red-hot and sharp-tailed. A mother might have bad heartburn in the thirteenth month. Then saint. Empathy and floods of tears for suffering humanity. The mother urinates like crazy. Then it's ready to come out. It's been scalded, flooded, a soul burned into it" (139-40).

Similarly, Belly, a character in Mary Burnett Smith's *Miss Ophelia* (1997), is disgusted that the unborn child in her friend Teeny is moving "like a tadpole" (26). A character in Paula Sharp's *I Loved You All* (2000) chastises Isabel Flood,

the admittedly radical pro-life character, for not having pictures of “earlier term fetuses, who would look more like tadpoles” (302).

The “tadpole” dehumanizing term for the unborn child is not relegated only to American fiction. The male character at the beginning of Sue Townsend’s *Ghost Children* (1997) calls the mothers who abort at an English clinic “tadpole carriers” (7). This character, whose duty is to remove the “garbage” from the clinic, further states that “killing tadpoles was fucking good business” (7).

iv. In fact, while I was casually reading a collection of European short stories, the editors of the collection asserted much the same claim as I will here: American fiction *per se* is still too young in contrast against European fiction. Edward and Elizabeth Huberman, editors of *Fifty Great European Short Stories* (1971) go on to say that “We see that what European stories have, which ours do not, is simply the weight of time and history.... When Edwin Muir, the Scottish poet and critic, visited the United States for a year in 1955, to give the Charles Eliot Norton letters [sic] at Harvard, he told his wife that he could not feel at home here because he had too keen a ‘sense of the human past.’ He needed land ‘that had been patiently tilled and worked over for generations’; and it is precisely that feeling of immemorial human living that in one way or another informs so many of these European stories and gives them a quality American stories naturally cannot possess.... [I]t derives most often simply from the inherent historical perspective, from the implicit suggestion of ancient events, customs and traditions...” (x).

v. Commenting on another German work, Paul Schalluck’s *Wenn man aufhören konnte zu lügen* [*If One Could Stop Telling Lies*] (1951), Keele documents a “chain” of disrespect for life: “Feticide, the first link in the chain thus forged, is also its lowest common denominator—killing in its most primal form. Anyone who can kill a fetus can kill him- or herself, or other humans or the whole human race. And...he can also murder God” (233).

vi. Even the Canadian Margaret Atwood, too, has become Americanized in her abortion plots. Her *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) is set in the futuristic Republic of Gilead, where the action of the novel was supposed to have taken place around 2045 A.D. The novel is supposed to be a “partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” held at the University of Denay,

Nunavit 25 June 2195 (Atwood 299). While the political intent of the novel is clear (the United States may cease to exist as an entity of several states), the abortion message of the novel is equally clear: if fundamentalist Christians have their way, then not only will abortion be made illegal again, but women themselves will be held in slavery to men. Thus, Atwood's abortion manifesto is no better than other American anti-life authors.

vii. Reading this passage reminds me of a quote from Louis Hemon's *Maria Chapdelaine: a Tale of the Lake St. John Country* (1921). Although French, Hemon wrote what is credited as one of the finest Canadian novels in praise of the French settlers in Canada. The novel ends with "the voice of Quebec" saying "Three hundred years ago we came, and we have remained.... They who led us hither might return among us without knowing shame or sorrow, for if it be true that we have little learned, most surely nothing is forgot" (184). Lest it be assumed that retrospection is a dominantly European quality and that American writers are more prospective, Hemon, too, is concerned with the future. The voice of Quebec continues her epideictic: "Concerning ourselves and our destiny but one duty have we clearly understood: that we should hold fast—should endure. And we have held fast, so that, it may be, many centuries hence the world will look upon us and say: These people are of a race that knows not how to perish.... We are a testimony" (185).