

JUDITH WILT

# ABORTION, CHOICE, AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION

The Armageddon of the  
Maternal Instinct



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Maternal Instinct*

Judith Wilt

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“There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality, if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.” (and women)

*Middlemarch*, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans)

This book is dedicated to all my women teachers, especially my mother, Mrs. Katherine Steffen Wilt Campbell, and Sister Mary Agnella of St. Francis Academy, the late Dr. Frances Chivers of Duquesne University, Professors Mary Burgan at Indiana University and Lynne Hanley at Hampshire College, and Dean Carol Hurd Green at Boston College.

# Preface

I first began to think about abortion as literary matter in the mid-1970s, when I was assigned to teach a course in twentieth-century American literature which paired John Barth's *The End of the Road* and Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* as examples of post-realistic fiction. The presence of abortion at the heart of each plot seemed more than coincidence. Abortion declined to leave either the front pages of newspapers or the plots of novels after the Supreme Court decision of 1973; as I began to look, I found it everywhere.

In Providence, Rhode Island, in 1985, a husband accuses his wife of killing their four-month-old daughter, because, after four abortions, she found she couldn't parent a live child. A young man burns down a house, it is reported, because his girlfriend aborted "his" child. During the 1984-85 television season an episode on "Hill Street Blues" presented a right-to-life demonstrator with a special dilemma—his too-enthusiastically waved demonstration sign caused an information seeking, not abortion seeking, young woman to slip and miscarry. If he sticks by his argument that the fetus is a person he is guilty of manslaughter; if he lets his defense attorney plead the fetus is by Supreme Court definition not a person, he goes free. In Ed McBain's 1985 mystery, *Lightning*, a reluctant father of four rapes only Catholic right-to-life women, the same women, until they become pregnant, so that, pregnant, they will face the "choice" their religion forbids.

As I complete this work in the summer of 1988 the stories continue. Summer paperback releases include Sara Paretsky's mystery, *Bitter Medicine*, where the right-to-lifers' bombing of a free clinic that occasionally performs abortions is prominently featured and deplored; John Gregory Dunne's latest lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-

famous-Catholics novel, *The Red, White and Blue*, where the only weak spot in the tough-as-nails female protagonist's makeup seems to be the reason she aborted her husband's father's child ("I won't talk about the scrape, Jack," she says, and, to the reader's bewilderment, she never does); playwright Marsha Norman's first novel, *The Fortune Teller*, where the kidnappers of twenty-two children are revenging themselves on an abortionist culture they blame for their daughter's early death by abortion; and the true-life story of Diane Downs (*Small Sacrifices*, by Ann Rule), convicted for trying to kill her three children in order to attract back her lover. According to psychiatrists Diane Downs loved to be pregnant, dreamed of a future as a continuing surrogate mother, but couldn't be a parent. And the July issue of *Soap Opera Digest* confirmed what we steady watchers knew: abortions are "out" and miscarriages are "in" this season, while pregnancy is, as ever, a staple of that group of narratives.

The confines of art are no less grotesque and complicated than the purlieu of life when it comes to abortion. But at least the truth of the author's intention and his/her achievement remains stable enough to be looked at and argued over. That is what, with humility, I propose to do in the following essays. At the same time, I feel the need to begin with history, especially case history. For lives, actual experiences, are surely the basis of art; and the fact is that the reality and multiplicity of experience are always in danger of being overwhelmed by, hyperordered by, art. I cannot really avoid this danger in a book of literary criticism, but I am aware of it, and aware, too, of a new spirit abroad, as *Roe vs. Wade* comes under increasing attack: a spirit which would delegitimize the rough and multiplex female experience that went into the abortion law reform movement in favor of the more totalizing perspectives of law or art. I want this book not to harbor that spirit.

The reader may well assume that I bring a personal attitude as well as literary ones to this task. I do. Let me see if I can express it. As a feminist and a Catholic, I believe a woman's freedom to abort a fetus is a monstrous, a tyrannous, but a *necessary* freedom in a fallen world. In an unfallen world (or in the moment of grace) there would be no necessity, therefore no freedom: the freedom is a sign

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of our dire necessity and coterminous with it. I have some sympathy with the principle, if not always with the methods, of those who would thrust the woe of this freedom into the arena of debate and the field of consciousness. But I must call, even for myself, and certainly for my countrywomen, for the necessary freedom of choice within which to make my soul, if I can, free from that necessity.



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# Introduction: The Wreck, and the Story of the Wreck

We live in a civilization," says psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva with brilliant simplicity, "where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood," a motherhood which essentially represents "the *fantasy* . . . of a lost territory."<sup>1</sup> This territory is plenitude, absolute fullness. The child remembers the mother as the experience of plenitude; the adult, inhabiting a limited body and personhood, desires progeny, extension, plenitude. Earlier psychoanalytic thinkers, preoccupied with Freud's vision of the female as a creature of "lack," explained the woman's desire to bear a child as a move to recapture the penis, the male power, absent from her own "castrated" body, or to actualize the core of a hidden female self. Both of these Freudian theories objectify the child as a completion of "valid" female identity: the male is born as its mother's phallus, the female as its mother's "best" self. The daughter is left, as we shall see in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, to seek out her self again in motherhood.

Heterosexuality and maternity, inherited, enforced, ascribed—the compensations for an all-pervading "lack." Many feminist thinkers argue that this vision of heterosexuality and maternity only expresses, and works in, patriarchy. In a new world envisioned by some feminist theory, however, a new sexuality, a born-again maternity, should offer wider possibilities to the individual, possibilities for integrating lives, creating new lives. While requiring activity and community, even modes of "completion," these possibilities would not be premised on lack, nor denigrate as lacking the sex whose body was, for all of us, the first experience of plenitude.

Early forms of this envisioned new world focused on critiques of the world as it is. So for the most part do the fictional stories about patriarchally constructed heterosexuality, maternity, choice, and abortion or birth that I will treat in the four essays that follow this introduction. That theory and these stories often suggest, fiercely or ruefully, that heterosexual maternity can have *no* place in the envisioned non-patriarchal world. More recent feminist theory has returned to maternity, especially “pre-Oedipal” maternity, as a ground for re-imagining human relationships.<sup>2</sup> This theory culminates in Julia Kristeva’s paradoxical distinction between heterosexuality, indeed sexuality itself, and maternity; whereas heterosexuality has arguably been entirely colonized by male dominance, maternity retains an edge of its original nature, its original wildness, not fully captured even by the huge apparatus of idealization, repression, reduction, and manipulation, which culture has applied to it.<sup>3</sup> Here the “realistic novel” cannot yet travel, though writers of fantasy (Ursula LeGuin, Monique Wittig) have marked out some parts of the path. Meanwhile, the very omission of “the mother” from much cultural representation, argues feminist film critic E. Ann Kaplan, provides some hope, since it shows that patriarchy is “not monolithic, not cleanly sealed.”<sup>4</sup> Gaps appear through which women can begin to ask questions and introduce change.

The makeshift seals of culture over maternity have now been split wide for a generation over the issue called abortion in the political and medical arena. The issue is in fact maternal choice. Though some element of maternal choice has been part of the lore of women back to its traceable dawn, in this generation “the maternal” exists no longer repressed in the unconscious, or as “the natural,” operating as biological or psychological “instinct.” For a larger part of the planet’s women than ever before, the maternal now exists on a spectrum reaching from the preconscious domain of fantasy to the hyperconscious discourses of medicine, law, psychology, economics, religion, and politics which structure choice. However rationalist these discourses strive to be, though, one hears always in them the disturbed echo of the preconscious root: “the fantasy of a lost territory.”

From this angle, it seems possible that the apocalyptic terror of

pro-life men and women, the subtle unease of pro-choice women and men, has some reference to this fantasy. Consciousness itself implies loss. Choice may not always result in abortion, but rhetorically it is abortion. In this respect every pregnancy precipitates a loss, not just those that end in abortion; just as every pregnancy at some level makes a mother, not just those that end in birth. What is lost, according to the pro-life position, is "the baby," fetishized projection appropriating the male other, or enacting the female self, or contacting an irrational reality, nature, or God. What is lost, admits the pro-choice position, is the choice not made, the possibility (completed maternity, or continuing independence, or limited maternity) that was set aside. What is lost, conflictless "maternal instinct," is replaced by conflict-ridden human choice. The quest is for plenitude, the seamless enactment of multiple simultaneous desires, to be *and* not to be "the mother." The abortion debate, pouring out of the gap in patriarchy's construction of "the maternal," is part of this quest.

Debate about abortion may begin with reasons, proceed to statistics, but it always comes down, really, to stories. "Your side doesn't tell the whole story." "But *your* side doesn't tell the *true* story." "This dramatic case history proves our point." "But *this* dramatic case history proves *our* point." "This tearful recantation from someone who used to believe as you do shows that our argument gets to the human heart of things." "But *this* poignant confession from someone who claimed to believe as you do shows that *our* argument answers human needs." Or, more deeply fought: "Your gender, age, experience, invalidates you as teller of this story, even if it is your own." "No, *your* religious training, or political ideology, or emotional exhaustion incapacitates *your* telling."

The abortion debate rides on overlapping narratives of pregnancy/birth. One is abstract, scientific, or religious: in it, life, transcendent, seeks its own extension, and the drama of individuals is a subplot. Two other narratives are essentially female: in one, woman gives birth to the Other—angelic, demonic, mystified; in the second, woman like all humans, only half-born at parturition, struggles toward the birth of an adult self. In this second female narrative, pregnancy/birth may offer a useful complication towards

that desired resolution: "I had been trying to give birth to myself," says Adrienne Rich of her first pregnancy, "and in some grim, dim way I was determined to use even pregnancy and parturition in that process."<sup>5</sup> Or pregnancy/birth may be in competition with it. The college friend who found her an abortionist just in time "handed me back my life," says Alice Walker. In exchange, "that week I wrote without stopping . . . almost all the poems in *Once*."<sup>6</sup>

Present in all these narratives, the ones women tell themselves, the ones society tells them, and especially the ones artists tell about women, are values of choice, freedom, knowledge. Choice, it seems in these narratives, reaches toward error when it becomes the management of the human, freedom when it becomes the greed to control utterly time and space, and knowledge when it ceases to strive against, re-create if necessary, the unknown. Since the Greeks, artists have warned that human beings should leave a space in the imagination for the work of the gods, an opening in the hero's plan for the divine surprise. The artists, allied in their bones with the notion of the surprise, can do no other. From Sophocles' Creon to the characters of Margaret Atwood and John Irving, it is the would-be manager they surprise; irresistible rational force meets immovable natural object.

Abortion, a malleable topos, seems to work most often under this law of plot: if abortion represents the unholy domain of control, the plot will dissent from, perhaps thwart it. To support abortion, which lends itself so easily to the unholy domain of control, the novelist will have to place the act in the domain of surprise, resistance to control. If a man attempts to control a woman through pregnancy, the plot will resist with abortion (Marge Piercy's *Braided Lives*); if a man attempts to control a woman through abortion, or a woman attempts to control "nature" with choice, the plot will resist with pregnancy (Margaret Atwood's feminist *Surfacing*, Faulkner's emphatically nonfeminist *As I Lay Dying*).

Furthermore, no novelist can resist the insistent pressure to provide some kind of aftermath for an abortion. Even when the narrative supports the structure of choice, even when it supports the particular choice which is its subject (Gail Godwin's *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Marsha Norman's *The Fortune Teller*), the "product of

conception" has its "birth" in the refusal, of character or narrator, to stop contemplating the conception. "That's all there is to it," the confident feminist daughter in *The Fortune Teller* says of the easy parameters of choice she foresees, and "That's all there is to it?" returns the meditating feminist mother, dumbfounded and unconvinced.<sup>7</sup> This pressure comes only partly from the novelist's moral universe; it comes most deeply from the demands of story itself.

Pregnancy, of course, is the ultimate surprise, the roof lifting just as you've finally got the doors and windows closed. Artists can make this malleable surprise play in dozens of ways, too. The narrative, or the character within the narrative, can define pregnancy as the proof of true womanhood or manhood, the reward or punishment of God, the fruit of good or bad sexuality, the sign of a relationship knitting or sundering, the extension, transformation, exposure, of the self (individual or social) which projects it. This definition will radically color the climax of the pregnancy narrative, whether it is birth or termination, and whether that narrative is a case history or a work of art.<sup>8</sup>

The telling of this story is a site of profound anxiety, not only for the teller (again, individual or social) whose self-definition stands thus revealed, but also for the hearer (or reader) who must encounter in this story the specter of his or her own potential not having been. If the pregnancy narrative ends before birth, even by accident but especially by choice, it leaves two ghosts in its wake: the ghost of the child that might have been and the ghost of the self that might have borne and parented that child. And, for a moment, the hearer may experience, in the confrontation with these imaginable but not real beings, the radical contingency of his or her own consoling "reality."

In the several books of case histories about pregnancy/birth or pregnancy/abortion decisions—books on all sides of the issue—women and some men testify to the presence of these ghosts in themselves. The pro-life movement defines these hauntings as the guilty price of choice made wrongly. For those who continue to confirm their choice of abortion, the ghosts remain as well, evidence of that desire for a plenteous and boundless self (one which both did and did not give birth), which the philosopher Jacques Lacan struc-

tures as the first stage of human desire. In Lacan's "imaginary" mode or order of being, the pre-Oedipal human seeks his or her mirror "image" and gladly reaches for it, believing, falsely as it turns out, that the oceanic fullness and connection it feels in its relationship with "world" will be located and confirmed there, in that image, which is itself. Alienation, limitation, boundary, comes with the inevitable human immersion in language, civilization, Lacan's "symbolic" order. Here the great power gained with one's first adventures in controlling reality by naming it barely compensates for the dismay felt at the loss of the image of self as all, or the terror felt upon the recognition that the word which enables the self to trap and hold some parts of the real is also what entraps, grounds, the self.

The narrative of pregnancy/abortion, then, with its ghostly outlines of unreachable plenitude through the looking glass of the self and its ultimate choice of the fiction of control—control of the body and its image, control of the future self in the making—takes us right back to the line we once crossed from the all-desiring imaginary to the rational symbolic, from the limitless world where choice has no meaning because no alternative excludes another, to the world we mostly think we have to live in, the world of either/or.

This has ties to what Kristin Luker's study of pro-choice and pro-life activists uncovered: that the two groups have internally consistent, mutually exclusive worldviews.<sup>9</sup> The pro-life worldview, like Lacan's imaginary, is immersed in, and at home with, transcendence, confident that all the "surprises" of human experience have a grace in them; that all new directions, even those that hit with the force of a blow, are one direction; that the plenteous self, the oceanic unity in the mirror, will be reached in the post-mortal end. The pro-choice worldview, bereft or uncertain of this end, dwells in Lacan's symbolic order, ready to speak, ready to plan, ready for the long, complex arc of reasoned thought toward best possible choice.

From this standpoint, paradoxically enough, the pro-life worldview, so apparently narrow and rigid in practice, so gender structured and hierarchical, prides itself on a philosophical vision of limitlessness—a vision that all possibility may be actuality; while the pro-choice worldview, so multivalent and uncoercive in practice, so

committed to the relaxation and crossing of gender and other boundaries, founds itself (pride is not quite the word) on a philosophical vision of human limits—a vision of oscillating losses and gains. And “the fall,” the demonic underside, of the pro-life worldview, Luker speculates, would be guilt, as its theorists and practitioners confront the difficulty of living up to the ideal of the limitless yes to creation. The shadow on the pro-choice worldview, as its theorists and practitioners confront both the difficulty of making moral choices where the guidelines have been so dissolved and the inevitable human weariness or shallowness that deserts the long arc of reasoning for the shortcuts of rationalization, would be anxiety (Luker, 186).

In a key Adrienne Rich poem the speaker, a solitary diver, seeks the truth of the “fall” of her world, and ours. “Diving into the Wreck,” while not a poem explicitly about abortion or motherhood, offers a vivid metaphor, I think, for that search for the “lost territory” of the mother, motherhood, and an unseparated and “blissful” childhood, which I have argued lies beneath the abortion debate. The speaker takes, in addition to the rubber flippers and oxygen mask, which both enable and distort her, “a book of myths,” which gives somewhat dim and coded directions, and a camera, for she intends in this quest to find “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth.”<sup>10</sup> Encountering “the drowned face . . . whose breasts still bear the stress,” the speaker becomes both male and female, becomes ultimately both speaker and listener/reader: “I am she: I am he. . . . We are, I am, you are.” Portentous, locked in gaze with the sun, the wreck says nothing of itself: though the camera records “the half-destroyed instruments / that once held to a course / the water-eaten log / the fouled compass,” the poem, fearful lest it become just one more page in the book of myths, leaves the multiple speaker/listener/questor storyless, staring at the thing itself, not even ready to say whether the quest was an act of “cowardice or courage.”

Yet, of course, with its echoes of Icarus and Atlantis, of the Apple, the Flood, and the Crucifixion, above all with its overlay of feminist “revision” of the story of Eve, the poem cannot ultimately free itself from story, must at last make another in the dimly guiding book of



myths. Indeed, its very minimalism, the “threadbare beauty” of “the ribs of the disaster” presented, renders “this scene” immediately capturable by the scenario the listener/reader brings. The thing itself glimmers, real but unreachable, like the infant’s image in the mirror, awaiting the story that will embody it.

The social narrative of women’s lives, the telling of true stories in public, itself has a kind of history to it, based on what was held to be necessary, interesting, or troubling about women. Much sacred storytelling from the dawn of the art reflects the narrative of (sacred) women giving birth. After the dawn, the focus of narrative moves to the crisis point of sexual and social initiation, courtship and marriage, as society charts the preparation of its women for giving birth. This sunny narrative is accompanied by (at least) three shadow narratives, stories of woman’s fall, disaster, wreck, which emerge, whether in life histories or works of art, when the social arrangement meets the human female fact. One narrative, following the woman stepping (or being pushed) aside from the preferred arrangements of courtship, encompasses seduction or rape and abandonment. Culturally celebrated fictions depicting this, a *Clarissa*, a *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, are deeply punitive of the victim even as they compassionate or ennoble her. They inevitably suggest that if she had scurried more quickly into a decent marriage she would have escaped her fate. A second narrative, directly concerned with marriage, focuses on adultery. Here again culture’s fictions, a *Scarlet Letter*, an *Anna Karenina*, intend to ennoble the socially thwarted but passionately risk-taking human spirit. But the end (maybe even goal) is punishment, or worse, self-punishment.

A third narrative, buried largely in private discourse until recently, moves the focus of woman’s story to maternity and follows her departure from that arrangement towards infanticide and abortion, a departure deeply entangled again with punishment, especially self-punishment. That is the narrative I wish to study here: first, briefly in the life histories caught up in, made use of by, the public discourse of abortion, and then more extensively in readings from (mostly) novels which reflect and help shape that public discourse. In all of these stories, the shape of the thing itself, the wreck as wreck, the wreck of the principle of unlimited life by the struc-