

Response to Prof. Koloze

Anne Barbeau Gardiner

I WISH TO THANK Dr Koloze for having fished these fascinating poems from the “Mariana Trench” where they lurked. It is to be wished that there were indeed a collection of poetry to be used in discussing right-to-life issues, for poetry is a highly condensed form of expression. A poem says in a few lines what it takes several pages of prose to convey. Dr. Koloze’s scansion and analysis of these poems reveals how their meter, or rhythmic pattern, contributes to their overall design. I would like to call attention also to certain figures of speech, such as metonymy, metaphor, and irony, which converge with the meter to reinforce the main points of these poems.

In the first poem, Cawein turns an infanticidal mother into a victim. He exculpates her by listing all the things she lacks: money, food, family, and kindred. Ignoring the fact that she could have abandoned her child without drowning him, he shows her faced with a Darwinian dilemma, either kill or die: “hard enough to live...for one; impossible for two.” As Dr Koloze shrewdly remarks, the murdered child is unheard in this poem except in a single line, where his cries of hunger drive his desperate mother to kill. The “tortured syntax” of those lines emphasizes her anguish over her decision to kill.

Cawein wants to present this woman, but not her child, as the victim. So he shows her as a real person with feelings, as in the phrase, “wrapped it warmly in her shawl.” But he depicts her victimizers as cold and impersonal: “Propriety bent / A look of wonder on her; raised a din / Of Christian outrage.” The terms “Propriety” and “Christian outrage” are both examples of metonymy, a figure of speech where the abstract replaces the concrete. As Dr. Koloze observes, the poet gives emphasis to *propriety* in his rhythmic design; indeed, he wants to persuade us that propriety, or impersonal contempt for the fallen woman, bears all the guilt for this infanticide. There is also metonymy in the phrase “child of shame and sin,” where “Propriety” turns the illegitimate child into the offspring of two

abstractions, thereby negating his humanity. The metric pattern that Dr. Koloze shows converges with the metonymies to show the mother as the real victim of a hypocritical Christian culture that condemns infanticide but does not even recognize a fallen woman's or an illegitimate child's humanity in the first place.

Marge Piercy's poem of 1980 is just as polemical as Cawein's of 1909, but it is not about a specific woman. For, as Dr. Koloze explains, it is a defense of abortion in general. Here as in the previous poem, it is not the murdered child but the mother who is the victim. Piercy is stridently "accusatory," as Dr. Koloze notes. She links the violence that wreaks havoc in Nature—*butchering lambs, slicing mountains in two for roads, and gouging plains for strip-mining—*with the oppression of women. The spondees in her poem convey a relentless aggression that culminates in the attempt to claim women's wombs for "mineral rights" and to use them as "fields for growing babies" like "lettuce." By comparing an unborn baby here with minerals and lettuce, Piercy suggests that the only victim in this power struggle is the woman. As Dr. Koloze points out, the one committing all this violence is addressed as "You," but the referent for "You" is vague.

The spondees in the poem are heavy with anger, as Dr. Koloze says. They are also heavy with irony, a figure of speech where one says the opposite of what one means. For Piercy accuses those who condemn abortions of being hypocrites because they do not cherish the children already born: "You value children so dearly / that none ever go hungry, none weep." In this passage she projects all the blame for social ills on those who want to stop abortions. They do not care about children at all, only about controlling women's wombs for their own ends.

Dr. Koloze is right about the next poem by Jan Beatty, that it should be added "to the canon of poetry on the first life issue of abortion." In this verse, published in 1995, Beatty looks at an abortion from two standpoints: first, the budding consciousness of the fetus, and second, his physical development. By using the personal pronoun "I," she acknowledges that the fetus is a person, and she makes this person speak as if conscious of the joy of being alive and

of having a warm mother. From the standpoint of physical appearance, however, the unborn child admits to having the “juices of calves’ tongues” pulsing in his veins and being covered with a loose “skin like young gray wrens.” On a physical level, then, the fetus puts himself on a par with animals in the plural, animals like calves, wrens, and later “underground creatures,” “greased worms,” and “dead moles.” The point is, that the unborn child does not look fully human in appearance, yet in interior life or consciousness he is already fully human.

Unlike the previous two poems, this one frankly presents the child as the victim. Dr. Koloze states that it is somewhat ambiguous whether the abortion actually takes place: “the denouement” is “uncertain.” Even so, Beatty reveals how violent and predatory an abortion really is when she compares the abortionist to a hungry wolf, and his instruments to “wolves’ teeth” prodding the earth to uncover some “underground creatures.” She sees nothing human in the abortionist: he is only an animal seeking his prey. Dr. Koloze notes that the mother has a single action in this poem—weeping. The child reports that his mother “cries.” Thus, if the abortion indeed took place, she reluctantly allowed the predatory act.

Dudley Randall’s poem of 1972 is linked with Beatty’s in that it too presents a right-to-life issue from the same two standpoints: consciousness and physical appearance. Randall tells his would-be “kindly killers” not to murder him even if he should look subhuman near the end, like “a stump, a butt,” or even if he should seem to them as impersonal as “a screaming pain, a putrefying stench.” In analyzing the rhythm of this poem, Dr. Koloze notes that the persona seems to triumph over his illness and hold on to his humanity right to the end, despite his decaying body. Like Beatty, Randall has written a pro-life poem. He begs us to assume that, regardless of outward appearance, a unique human spirit exists at every stage of life. Even if our humanity escapes observation at some point, it must remain a given that, as long as life endures, we possess an interior consciousness much too precious to be snuffed out. These two poems enshrine human life far above the reach of utility, expedience, and power struggles.