



MODERNISM, MONSTERS, AND MARGARET SANGER

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Tony Telura, the young protagonist of Mary Heaton Vorse's "The Magnet," wakes up in a "spectral and dark" tenement hall to the piercing sound of a woman's screams that "slithered through him" like "a slashing knife" (8). These screams do not arise because of a ghost, vampire, or any other supernatural demon despite the gothic overtones of the story. Rather, Tony's nightmarish experience in Vorse's 1921 short story is occasioned by his mother in childbirth. A similarly disturbing picture of maternity develops in Rita Wellman's "On the Dump," a story published three years earlier in the same venue, Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review (BCR)*.¹ In Wellman's story, a poor, pregnant woman allows herself to become human trash, slipping to her death on a pile of "tobacco cans, old pans, dirty ripped mattresses," and one "obscene" corset (7). Mrs. Robinson's desperation at her perpetual pregnancies—she has "faced death" ten times—leaves her thinking that death on a dump heap is a welcome release and fitting end for someone society has discarded like so much trash (7). In these stories of madness and surprising violence, indeed throughout the *BCR*, gothic aesthetics and contraception (or the lack thereof) combine to create a singularly modernist narrative of maternity.

This essay explores the intersection of modernist aesthetics and the politicized narratives of the US birth control movement. By examining the depiction of the maternal body within the texts of Sanger, Vorse, and Wellman, we see a side of aesthetic autonomy that is anything but autonomous: although artists may attempt to create

a work of art that is complete onto itself, the narratives in *BCR* show that the impulse toward autonomy obscures terrifying political and ethical ramifications of an apolitical, disengaged aesthetic. I analyze this depiction of autonomy as a kind of doubling, a way of showing the other as the same, which further suggests a way to understand how the dominant rhetoric of the birth control movement could shift from feminist revolution to patriarchal eugenics.

Although scholarship has been slow to recognize the connections between literary modernism and the birth control movement, their overlap is readily apparent. The symbolic possibilities of birth control unite major modernist concerns like linguistic uncertainty, rapid technological change, and distrust in traditional institutions and grand narratives. Through its ability to stop a family line, female-controlled contraceptives such as the diaphragm can represent a break in the connection with the future and with the nuclear family; because it disrupts the definition of "woman" as inextricably also "mother," it uncouples signifier and signified while also making the usual female life narrative (child-wife-mother) available for the analogous experimentation that modernists exerted in fiction.

The narrative that replaces the child-wife-mother trajectory in the pages of *BCR* invokes a kind of neo-gothic vitalism. This narrative, which I call the modernist conception narrative, appropriates gothic features in order to show the female body as an organism with an autonomous will to reproduce. This form of vitalism, although evolved from gothic traditions, is no longer linked to the return of the dead directly or literally. Instead, through fragmentation and linguistic iteration the modernist conception narrative depicts corporal bodies with an autonomous, at times mechanistic, existence. Zombies are a close but inexact analogy. Similar to the zombie, the maternal body here has a single purpose that it pursues unthinkingly and in a way that confuses the border between life and death. Yet these women have not returned from the dead. They are brought to the brink of death by a body that has *too much* life: the vitalist body's fertility, coupled with the incessant drive to reproduce, wears the body out and frustrates the mind with efforts to control it. If, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued, the task of women writers in the twentieth century was to imagine new narratives for the lives of women (4), the stories by Vorse and Wellman demonstrate that this task was undertaken in earnest in the intersection of modernist literature and the birth control movement. By examining this intersection, we can see that many of the birth control movement's discursive constructions around gender, technology, and the maternal body can be traced and understood through modernist concerns.

Because aesthetic autonomy in the modernist conception narrative draws an explicit connection between the art object and politics, it is a far cry from the depictions of autonomy usually associated with modernism. The traditional, and at one time monolithic, interpretations held that modernists were obsessed with the art object's removal from the daily, modernized world. In William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks's archetypal, New Critical, understanding of aesthetic autonomy, art establishes "its own kind of intrinsic worth . . . apart from, and perhaps even in defiance of, the rival norms of ethics and politics" (476). Wimsatt and Brooks are concerned primarily with the autonomy of the art object from politics, but this is, of course, only one of the ways scholars use the concept of autonomy. Wimsatt and Brooks's idea of autonomy eschews the sense in which it might refer to the art object's independence from meanings given by the viewer/reader, as Lisa Siraganian argues in *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life*, or in which autonomy might refer to that of the individual artist, as Peter Nicholls contends. Nevertheless, Nicholls's argument is worth further comment because it contains a concept that is useful for understanding the modernist conception narrative. Nicholls identifies a tradition of female modernism that rejects the autonomy of the artist: H. D. and Gertrude Stein developed a poetics "founded not on autonomy but on the continuities between self and world" (200) and "preoccupied with what seems other but turns out to be the same" (202). Nicholls identifies this "doubleness" as a critique of the impersonal, object-based poetics hailed by the "Men of 1914" (Pound, Eliot, and Lewis). Vorse, Wellman, and Sanger develop a modernist poetics similar to that of H. D. and Stein by invoking aesthetic autonomy to critique it. That this critique should be part of a female tradition is understandable when we consider the fact that writing itself was a political act for women. The history of women writers, explains Sowon S. Park, is necessarily different from the canonical history of literature because it is inextricably connected to political concerns: "women's writing and political engagement have always been evidently mutually dependent. Between 1890 and 1920, for example, the first-wave feminist movement ignited a veritable explosion of literature about, by, and for women" (172–73). Female modernists were positioned to understand and make use of the uneasy relationship between an aesthetics of autonomy and political engagement. The modernist conception narrative foregrounds this relationship and directs our attention to the political ramifications of autonomy as an aesthetic goal. My main concern is the art object's dissociation from the politics and ethics of the daily, material world. As such, my argument wrestles with ideas of autonomy in the vein of Wimsatt and Brooks.

In the narratives of Sanger, Vorse, and Wellman, these ramifications are exemplified in the maternal body. As we will see, the particular narrative of poverty constructed in the pages of *BCR* reduces the political autonomy of poor women while it simultaneously and paradoxically argues for their increased independence. In these narratives, such ideological doubling is literalized in an autonomously reproducing body. Historically, the maternal body has been thought of as outside politics and the public sphere altogether, granting it a veneer of autonomy. Consider, for instance, certain nineteenth century aesthetic traditions that explicitly gender concepts such as the modern, the city, and the home. Rita Felski explains that these traditions displace women from the public sphere:

. . . a recurring identification of the modern with the public was largely responsible for the belief that women were situated outside processes of history and social change. In texts of early Romanticism one finds some of the most explicitly nostalgic representations of femininity as a redemptive refuge from the constraints of civilization. Seen to be less specialized and differentiated than man, located within the household and an intimate web of familial relations, more closely linked to nature through her reproductive capacity, woman embodied a sphere of atemporal authenticity seemingly untouched by the alienation and fragmentation of modern life. (16)

Political arguments against birth control often followed the same lines. Opponents frequently relied on ideas of the maternal body as sacred and timeless and of birth control as obscene in order to argue that the issue was simply too private, too embarrassing, and too immoral to discuss in public. Members of the 1929 US House of Representatives overwhelmingly refused to discuss birth control with Sanger because they were embarrassed to broach the issue with a woman or because "It is revolting to interfere in people's personal affairs" (qtd. in Baker 207). The idea that women, especially mothers, were timeless, private, and pure beings shaped political policy as much as it did literary aesthetics.

These arguments, then, are not so much against birth control as they are against the attempt to bring discussions of maternity and female sexuality into the public sphere. But denying the realities of a historically situated body does not make it autonomous. Rather, thinking of the maternal body as autonomous makes it grotesque, distorted, and senseless. The stories in *BCR* imply that the inability of women to control their own bodies—signified as a lack of access to birth control—results from the drive to make the female body autonomous.

Thus, in contrast to the aesthetic autonomy espoused by Pound and Eliot, the modernist conception narrative depicts autonomy as a ghastly punishment rather than a goal to be achieved. Through repeated and undesired childbirth, women's bodies take on lives of their own, reproducing "hordes" (a frequently used term in *BCR*) of unwanted children that bring on poverty, ignorance, and war. Fittingly, as John Paul Riquelme has shown, gothic literature is historically connected to the politics of social change. "The gothic imaginary," argues Riquelme, "is frequently a vehicle for staging and challenging ideological thinking rather than a means of furthering it" (588). The modernist conception narrative employs this tradition of invoking ideology to critique it: the stories in *BCR* literalize autonomy in the female body as a way of critiquing the political and aesthetic impulses to abstract that body from politics, history, and the public sphere.

Modernism's distinct influence on the rhetoric of Sanger's birth control movement is due to reasons both general and specific. First, the concerns of literary modernism—the questions asked, ideas championed, and values held—were salient throughout the educated Anglo-American world at the turn of the twentieth century. Modernism and the birth control movement were responses to much the same social, political, and cultural milieu: both movements had roots in New York City, both were responses to (and attempts to take advantage of) radical social upheavals, and both were influenced by thinkers such as Freud, Nietzsche, and Darwin.

Second, and more specifically, Sanger hailed from New York's avant-garde community. She and the movement can be justifiably elided: Sanger, to a large extent, was the movement in America. Although she had rivals for leadership of the birth control movement, Sanger and her life story became the most prominent representations of it. Indeed, the general public came to see Sanger as equivalent to the movement; she even received letters addressed to "Mrs. Birth Control" (Baker 133). This elision persisted at least into the 1950s when a character in Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) states that she "called Margaret Sanger Clinic," a phrasing B. W. Capo argues merges the person with the clinic: "It is not *the* clinic named for Sanger, or Sanger's clinic: the individual and the structure are one and the same" (185).

Raised in Corning, New York, Sanger moved to the City with her first husband, William Sanger, and their three young children. In these early years, both parents were active in anarchist and socialist groups. She was later a vital part of the Heterodoxy Club and Mabel Dodge's salon, where she mingled with artists and radicals such as Djuna Barnes, Carl Van Vechten, and Alfred Stieglitz (Barnet 139–46). Dodge's coterie viewed Sanger as a revolutionary, preaching open

relationships, "sex-expression", and the role of contraception in female liberation (Baker 62–3).²

Mary Heaton Vorse was among the literary figures moving in this progressive set. Vorse, a founding member of "that Greenwich Village nursery of modern feminism, the remarkable Heterodoxy Club" (Garrison xiii), grew up in a wealthy New England family, which she rejected in favor of the avant-garde artist communities in Paris and New York. She later became an ardent labor activist and journalist, often focusing on the plight of poor women and children; thus, her involvement with the birth control movement is a logical extension of her journalism. Along with her many news articles, Vorse wrote hundreds of short stories, published sixteen books and two plays. Rita Wellman, too, often wrote in genres other than fiction. In truth, she is better known as a playwright than a fiction writer. As a member of the Provincetown Players, the loose-knit group of playwrights and theater supporters co-founded by Susan Glaspell in 1915, Wellman saw four of her plays produced by the group. In 1918, her play *The Gentle Wife* opened on Broadway. Despite her obvious talent as a playwright, Wellman soon turned her attention away from the theater and began publishing novels, short stories, and non-fiction works (Barlow 8–9). Although Sanger's affiliations with radical, avant-garde figures such as Vorse and Dodge waned over time, Sanger stayed connected with liberal-minded communities throughout her years as a nurse and later as an activist.

While working as a nurse in New York City in the 1910s, Sanger, who cared primarily for poor, immigrant women, saw first-hand the squalid living conditions of the city's laboring communities who could not afford to support any more children. Abstinence, as Sanger and the women in these communities knew, was not a feasible option for birth control. Besides Sanger's personal belief that "sex-expression" was necessary for healthy adults (Baker 62–3), she saw that these women could not have stopped their husbands from sleeping with them even if they wanted to. Sanger claims that these experiences launched her into a life of advocacy despite her scant knowledge or training for it (*Autobiography* 86–92).

Eventually Sanger's advocacy became centered on publishing her own little magazines. Reaching her desired audience through these magazines was a delicate and difficult prospect. In the early twentieth century, birth control raised concerns on a number of levels for many Americans: it gave women the potential for greater control over reproduction, made people acknowledge that couples sometimes had sex for reasons other than procreation, and meant talking about sex in general. Furthermore, discussion of contraception was severely restricted by the Comstock Act, which prohibited shipping obscene

materials through the US Postal Service. These prohibited materials explicitly included contraceptive information.³ Nevertheless, contraceptive practices were relatively common among the upper classes by virtue of their access to private clinics, and the lower classes were aware that such methods existed even if they were not privy to the necessary practical knowledge. And so, in cultural, legal, and the aforementioned political realms, Sanger needed to transform birth control from a private practice into a public conversation.

The little magazines edited, published, and often financed by Sanger aimed to enact such a transition. *BCR*, the second magazine run by Sanger, began in 1917 and did not cease publication until 1940 (though Sanger stepped down from the position of chief editor in 1929). *BCR* was a non-profit and had a circulation of 15,000 by 1924 (Sanger, *Selected Papers* 392). The first of Sanger's two periodicals, *Woman Rebel*, closed in 1914 after only one year due to charges of obscenity under the Comstock Act.⁴ To avoid a similar fate for *BCR*, the magazine avoided explicit discussions of contraception. Instead, it worked to gain support for the cause, which could—and eventually did—result in the loosening of the Comstock Act.⁵

Although the magazine's primary concern was political, its editors also consciously positioned it as an artistic endeavor. The second issue of *BCR*, from March 1917, contains a letter from a reader that states, "I have just read the first number of the *Birth Control Review*. It is brilliant. It is artistic with the restraint all real art shows. And it is convincing" (Hope 16). The inclusion of this note within the second issue implies that the magazine's editors agreed with and wanted to promote the idea of the magazine as an artistic as well as political endeavor. The reader had good reason to call the first issue "artistic," a label the magazine continued to embrace in subsequent issues. In 1919, for instance, *BCR* published two short stories, one play, and thirteen poems (including ones by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and James Russell Lowell in the November issue and Helen Hoyt in the May issue), and most of these works depict involuntary motherhood as an unnatural and painful state. Moreover, between 1918 and 1921 the editorial staff included several art editors and at times a dedicated literary editor. The March 1917 issue features a fictional vignette by Olive Schreiner as well as one of Angelina Weld Grimké's best-known stories, "The Closing Door." Many writers, cartoonists, and illustrators published works in *BCR* at the same time that they published works in magazines such as the *Masses*, the *New Republic*, the *Modernist*, and the *Crisis*. Even pieces that are not explicitly literary make hazy the line between art and politics. As B. W. Capo argues, "in tone, character type, and narrative the letters and the literature [in *BCR*] often sound interchangeable, demonstrating the dialogue between

women's lived reality and fiction" (xiv). The inclusion of stories, plays, and poetry tapered off in the later years of the magazine, but formed a significant part of each issue throughout the 1920s (Capo 149).

The literature in *BCR* was not any more instructive about the practical aspects of birth control than the non-fiction pieces—its purpose was not to subvert Comstock—but it did form a powerful part of the storytelling rhetoric that Sanger employed to help "bridge the tension between norms of femininity and the expectations that existed for public discourse" (Emerling Bone 30). Both advocates and critics used literary techniques and referred to literary traditions in framing their positions because they offered a way of moving between private sentiment and politics. As such, *BCR* falls in line with many of the little magazines that proliferated in the US in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many artists at this time, argues Mark Morrisson, were energized and optimistic about the potential for commercial culture and print media to reconnect the masses with art's transformative potential. "When modernists in America published in magazines like the *Masses*, rather than in purely literary magazines like *Poetry*," argues Morrisson, "their works entered into dialogue with the other discourses in those magazines, and both helped to shape them and were in turn shaped by them" (202). This interaction between modernism and the public sphere, as many critics have shown, complicates our understanding of the various ways modernists interacted with the general public and with political debates.⁶ The literary and artistic current running throughout the pages of *BCR* makes it an important addition to the little magazines studied in conjunction with modernism. Seeing *BCR* as an artistic creation rather than a neutral scientific conversation (Sanger's ostensible aim)⁷ places emphasis on the artificiality or constructedness of the project, and encourages us to recognize that the American birth control debate could take place in different terms and with different narratives.

Nevertheless, amid the various possibilities a particularly salient narrative emerged from *BCR*, one that draws on modernist and gothic aesthetics to engage the interplay between politics and aesthetic autonomy. Rita Wellman's "On the Dump," which appeared in the December 1918 issue, illustrates the challenge to aesthetic autonomy that is latent in the modernist conception narrative. Set in the outskirts of a tenement neighborhood, the story begins as Mrs. Robinson is walking home from the store with bread for her husband's dinner. She is distracted by the sight of something sparkling on the dump heap, a reminder of her wedding ring ("real diamonds were too expensive so they chose one produced by science" [7]), which leads to thoughts of her disintegrating marriage, recently discovered pregnancy, and weary resignation to the increased poverty a new baby

will bring. As she contemplates her life of ceaseless work, pain, and despair, Mrs. Robinson comes to the conclusion that "the prize of life" is death. She then loses her footing on a slippery, "obscene" corset and slides down the dump toward a river below, barely managing to catch hold of a tree stump on the way. But then, feeling that "some strap in her mind had loosened" and realizing that death would be an end to the "nausea and torture and work, forever and ever," she lets go of the stump (7). Mrs. Robinson realizes too late that she does not want to die this way and calls out for help, but her pleas go unanswered and she drowns in the river. The story concludes with an alternate, synchronous ending in which a birth control reformer answers Mrs. Robinson's pleas for help. In a gothic twist reminiscent of zombie lore, the second ending effectively brings Mrs. Robinson back from the dead.

Mrs. Robinson's suicide is a reprisal of the self-sacrifice performed by Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*. Although Patmore's poem was originally published in 1854, and although its ideology faced significant challenges from feminists, suffragettes, and the changes wrought by WWI, Patmore's angel nevertheless remained influential in the inter-war period. Most novels written by women in this period espoused the moral that "in order to be happy, to fulfil herself as a woman, it was important for her to sacrifice, to dote and—eventually—to self-abnegate" (Beauman 82). As such, the modernist conception narrative struggles against residual, nineteenth-century ideas of a glorified, self-sacrificing maternity. Indeed, the work of Sanger and Wellman represents a significant alteration of the traditional maternal narrative: childbirth here means facing death and motherhood equals torturous work. Sanger's own essays in *BCR* characterize the maternal body as a "breeding machine" and "dumb instrument" ("Woman"). The horror that gives lie to Patmore's vision of motherhood is palpable in the narratives of involuntary motherhood throughout *BCR*.

If the maternal body has often been characterized as a site of hybridity (in that it is both hers and not hers; the fetus is alive and yet not fully alive; the fetus is a futurity that situates the woman in the present and the future), the modernist conception narrative goes further still by literalizing that hybridity in the maternal body. This body operates independently of the mind but the two are still yoked together in an ostensibly, uncannily, recognizable person. This hybridity is not immediately apparent in Wellman's story but rather develops over the course of the narrative through a series of linguistic processes that reveal the body's autonomy. The first sign of such autonomy comes when we are told that "some strap" came loose in Mrs. Robinson's mind (7). This mental slippage occurs just before her foot slips on the corset on the dump heap. Body and mind

are here in accord, but not for long. The loosening straps reveal the extent to which Mrs. Robinson's body has become autonomous. As an article of clothing that straps-in the female body in an attempt to shrink the waistline, the corset regulates and minimizes the so-called excesses of the female body, including the swelling belly of pregnancy. But the straps have come loose; Mrs. Robinson's mind does not have the ability to contain the body's autonomous will to reproduce excessive numbers of children. Through this process of "unstrapping" the body, Wellman imaginatively walls off the body's animation from the mind's control.

As Mrs. Robinson's growing madness implies, her mind deteriorates at the expense of her ceaselessly reproducing body. In line with a "Gothic modernism" tradition identified by Jeff Wallace, this narrative features a "diagnosis of a failure of life, the signaling of lack or absence" (122). Importantly, however, it is only one aspect of life that has failed: Mrs. Robinson, like all women figured in the modernist conception narrative, loses her physical life paradoxically because the maternal body has too much life. As Kepler Hoyt, a contributor to *BCR*, puts it, involuntary motherhood is a "curse" that leaves the woman "blank, empty, a grey automaton, a mere shell" (11). These automaton bodies still cook, clean, and reproduce, but the woman's mind has nothing to do with it.

The vitalistic functioning of Mrs. Robinson's body begins to develop early in the story, even hinted at before the body's unstrapping. We find out that Mrs. Robinson thought she prevented this pregnancy through "little inherited wisdoms" (7), presumably contraceptive methods that the women in her community whisper among themselves. In other words, she attempted to use shared knowledge to control her body but failed. Wellman enhances the dissociation between mind and body linguistically; in free indirect discourse, Mrs. Robinson thinks, "there was always another [child] growing within her body, the body that must care for the living child, the body that must clean and cook for those running around, the body that must always be at the disposal of her husband." "Her" body becomes "the" body, an organism that runs on its own. Through language, then, the body becomes self-animated.

The repetitive quality of this excerpt is worth comment as it is not the only instance of repetition in the story. In the initial ending, Mrs. Robinson allows herself to slip into the river but begins to second-guess her decision: "She was choking. She wanted air. Help! There was no one to help. What was that word? Science. Science . . . Funny word. Meant something. And then down again. Peace. Peace and Death. Thank God!" (10). Mrs. Robinson's vacillations end with acceptance of and relief from suicide. The seemingly odd inclusion

of "science" in her last moments is actually part of a refrain in her thought patterns. Earlier in the plot, Mrs. Robinson remembers the day she and her husband bought her ring: "The young man who had sold it to them had said something about science. The real diamonds were too expensive so they chose one produced by science. Mrs. Robinson always remembered that. Her diamond and science? It had seemed very important" (7). Her fixation on the word "science" (and the birth control it implies) indicates a lack of control over her own body. This situation, the narratives in *BCR* imply, is attributable to the drive to think of the female body as autonomous, that is, removed from history, science, and all other public spheres. On a political level, the inability to access birth control prevents Mrs. Robinson from bringing her body back under her mind's control.

On an aesthetic level, Mrs. Robinson's fixation on the word "science" encourages us to see her story as a comment on the role of language in political discourse. With each repetition of "science," the word becomes more absurd. The first reference connects it to a definite object—a ring—though Mrs. Robinson cannot explain why science seems important in this context. Later, immediately preceding her drowning, science has lost all connection to the material world and is now simply a sound, a "funny word" that used to mean "something." The emphasis shifts from the word's meaning to its materiality. Science, once something that could help Mrs. Robinson participate in the traditional romance narrative, becomes meaningless through reiteration, no longer connected to the material world. Its free-floating autonomy is useless to prevent Mrs. Robinson's dissociation of mind and body, a depiction that shows the potentially terrible results of autonomy.

In the reproductive rights debate, then as now, linguistic uncertainty figures as trouble rather than potential. Discussions of abortion often boil down to a single question: is a fetus also a person, and how do we know for sure? The answer to this linguistic quandary would seem to solve the debate, but the question points to its own unanswerability. Language is here incapable of expressing the liminal status of a fetus (particularly since the characteristics of that status are constantly changing as the woman's term progresses), and with it the impossibility of fixing the fetus's right or claim to life. The same questions—What is life? What is value? How can we tell alive from dead, blessing from curse, waste from woman?—operate within debates about birth control.⁸ Because questions of categorization are central to these debates, they are intimately connected with the linguistic uncertainty that forms a major part of the modernist literary aesthetic.

Linguistic iteration, understood in this light, can undermine more than just the idea of a coherent self. If linguistic iteration functioned in "On the Dump" to show Mrs. Robinson's inability to control her own body, in Mary Heaton Vorse's "The Magnet" it reveals the mind's inability to control or even understand the grand narratives and institutions that benefit from the reproductions of the vitalist maternal body. As the opening paragraph of this essay describes, Vorse's "The Magnet" is the story of a ten-year-old boy dealing with the realities of unwanted pregnancy. The story opens with Tony Telura pondering the wonders of a magnet. He is interrupted by two neighbor girls who tease him because his mother is always crying. The reason for her tears is twofold: Tony's mother is pregnant and his father is not working due to a labor lockout. (The poverty of the characters in this and Wellman's story is central to the modernist conception narrative in ways I will return to.) One of the girls responds, "Babies is awful any time, but in lockouts, Jeze! they's fierce" (8). Soon thereafter, Tony's mother goes into labor.

Tony, in bed in another room, spends the night listening to screams "like nothing human, rending the night, rending him" (8). His father is thrown into a different, but no less terrifying, state by the new baby. Desperate for work and facing eviction, Robert Telura hits upon an awful idea. "There are asylums for orphans," he thinks, "widows with week old babies—are taken care of" (16). Seeing this as the only way to provide for his family, the elder Telura shoots himself. Since Mrs. Telura is reduced to a lifeless shell at the story's close, Tony is actually fatherless and essentially motherless. Nevertheless, Tony's magnet, a symbol of science and wonder, provides a faint sliver of hope. As Tony places a nail a little distance from the magnet, the nail, we are told, "leaped the gap" (16). The absence of Tony's parents creates an emotional gap in his own life, but the science of birth control, this story implies, can prevent such a gap in others' lives.

The future implied by this marginally hopeful ending is no help for the Teluras' present. Tony's mother changes in an instant from "wife" to "widow," but this new label, thought by Robert Telura to be salvation, only serves to devalue her and her children. The Teluras' priest tells them he will do the best he can for the family, but that the four children are "too young to be adopted easily—not old enough to work" (16). Society values children not because they are sacred blessings, but for their labor potential. The shift from "wife" to "widow" and "child" to "orphan" can happen in an instant and, though the people labeled by these words are essentially the same, their places in society are radically different.

Vorse reinforces this linguistic shiftiness with her deft use of homonymy. "Father" becomes uncoupled from its signified, switching from "priest" to "male parent" to an unidentifiable referent. When the priest arrives at the Telura apartment, an anonymous speaker asks, "What are you going to do, Father?" (16). Not only does this question signal another possible significance for the word "father," but it also indicates that *this* is the male figure who will make decisions for the Telura family. The role of head of the household is displaced from Robert Telura to the local priest.

The significance of "father" is further troubled when Vorse, six short sentences later, shifts the definition back to "male parent" by stating, "Tony stood between the room where his father lay under the sheet and the room where his mother lay in bed staring at nothing" (16). The meaning of "father," already loosened, is completely detached by the subsequent sentence. Tony thinks, "*Where had his father gone?*" (16). Staring at his father while thinking these words, the boy is immersed in linguistic uncertainty brought on in the first place by the slippery significance of words like "life" and "value." The inability to know, which is attendant upon an inability to categorize, is thereby invoked through linguistic iteration. The stories by Wellman and Vorse question the boundaries between the civilized and savage (what kind of civilization makes its people disposable?), life and death (is Mrs. Telura's numbness all that different from Mr. Telura's death?), natural and unnatural (how natural is an unwanted creature invading a woman's body?). By removing women from the public sphere, the drive to keep women autonomous stifles their participation in the legal and moral discussion of such questions and thus makes them (and their families) vulnerable to the grotesque punishment of incessant pregnancy as depicted in *BCR*.

Linguistic iteration, the repetition with variation as I have discussed it here, is a kind of doubleness. As previously mentioned, the modernist conception narrative is part of a female literary tradition that questions aesthetic autonomy by using a technique Nicholls refers to as "doubleness," showing that what is thought to be other is actually the same. Doubleness is of, course, a key aspect of the gothic as well, and gothic aesthetics complicate the modernist conception narrative by invoking the reverse of Nicholls's formulation, so that what seems the same turns out to be other. Indeed, the husbands in these stories can be read as exemplars of "the doubled men of gothic fiction," what DuPlessis describes as the "bland nice man who is unmasked as the villain, cruel moody man who is revealed as the hero" (45). Mrs. Robinson and her husband were once in love, and Mrs. Telura once laughed as often as she now cries, but the constant cycle of pregnancy turns husbands into villains, marriage into violence,

and lovers into inadvertent murderers. This, argues the narratives in *BCR*, is what happens when the female body is imagined as an atemporal, apolitical, aestheticized object. And since these stories do not displace the gothic into foreign, exotic lands but rather modernize the narrative, the characters represent our mothers, husbands, and marriages.

The apparent nonsense of this kinship system is Tony Telura's chief concern, which leads him to ask unanswerable questions: "What made us be born? People got married and then had babies—but why . . . none of them could tell him—why. No one knew. . . . Tony asked how it all began in school. They couldn't answer him there" (16). Certainly, these questions signal a nascent distrust in traditional kinship systems such as marriage and family, but more importantly Tony's inability to find answers implies that they do not exist. This modern reprisal of the gothic undermines stable identities, narratives, and morals, leaving answers rooted in such ideas in the lurch. The vitalist body is *nonsense*—inexplicable, illogical, and unnatural. That does not mean, however, that it is value-neutral. The children produced by this body become tools for oppressive systems. Each new pregnancy exacerbates the Robinsons' and Teluras' poverty, and the Telura children seem destined for economic servitude.

Whereas Wellman's "On the Dump" is shaped by the tragedy of human waste, Vorse's "The Magnet" portrays characters who live with the daily reminder that some people are disposable. The casualness with which the children talk about unwanted people implies that this idea is familiar, routine even. Human waste, in this latter story, is normalized and emptied of the tragic overtones Wellman attaches to it. These stories, then, fall in line with modernist-gothic tales that Smith and Wallace identify as having a "fascination with the potential erosion of moral value, and with the forms that amorality can take" (3). The amorality of legal, political, and aesthetic systems that imagine the female body as autonomous lies in a woman's inability to prevent the transformation of her body into an autonomous, mechanical organism. In Sanger's words, the vitalist maternal body "grind[s] out a humanity which fills insane asylums, almshouses and sweatshops, and provides cannon fodder that tyrants may rise to power on the sacrifice of her offspring" ("Woman").

Although the desire for birth control spans all classes, marital statuses, and attitudes toward motherhood, *BCR* foregrounds the plight of poor women. The characterization of unwanted maternity as a curse linked to poverty is echoed throughout *BCR*. The second issue, March 1917, proclaims, "Birth-control provides a most natural and effective means for the reduction of poverty, with its disease, vice and crime, and for the production of a superior race" ("Capital

Resolutions" 16). Here as elsewhere, poverty is implicitly linked with an "inferior race." The poor mother, already marked by her monstrous maternal body, becomes doubly stigmatized because her poverty makes her unfit to have more children until (or *if*) she is able to escape poverty. So for *BCR*, poverty is not just an economic problem but a biological one that needs to be controlled.

Implicitly, the issue is also an aesthetic one. The combination of the gothic with poverty produces a particularly unsettling narrative. Poor women's bodies are depicted as abundantly alive organisms that continually produce herds of inferior creatures. Reading *BCR* for any length of time leaves one with the impression that poor women are a wretched sort of half-human creature. Their fecundity marks them as closer to nature, to death, and to their animal instincts than any middle or upper-class counterpart. They are more timeless, less modern, less connected to the public sphere, and so more autonomous. For the Robinsons and Teluras, removing women from history and politics, which removes them from the nexus of control and power, punishes the entire family. To be fair, *BCR* argued that everyone, regardless of income, should postpone parenthood until both parents are financially and emotionally fit.⁹ Further, *BCR* occasionally printed materials that suggest that class is mutable and not innate, such as the story of Mrs. F who could not afford to have children until her husband finished dental school; thus her poverty is understood to be temporary ("Do Women" 80).

Nevertheless, the dominant narrative in the magazine links poverty with inferiority, dehumanizing poor women who continue to have children they cannot afford while simultaneously granting affluent women more latitude in their family planning decisions by virtue of their increased wealth. This narrative thus fights for the rights of poor women by appealing to elitist stereotypes of the poor as inferior creatures in need of help from the more enlightened upper classes. In this paradox, we can see that Sanger's narrative is doubled, and that its rhetorical persuasiveness derives from the fact that the narrative escapes any single, fixed meaning: it simultaneously appeals to divergent audiences, reflecting the turn-of-the-century cultural shift by paying homage to both radical and conservative aims.

As mentioned previously, Sanger in her early days as an activist argued that birth control offered a way to free women from what she called "sex-bondage" ("Woman and War" 5). Implicit in this argument is the idea that motherhood should be voluntary—that women should be able to renounce motherhood entirely should they so choose, even as they enjoy the pleasures of sex. This idea radically undercut the traditional notions of family and woman (since "mother" could not be automatically linked to "woman" as an eventuality). But as radical

as Sanger's ideas about birth control might have been at the time, this rebellious attitude did not extend to other feminist causes by the time Sanger was publishing *BCR*. Sanger, a single-cause activist, reduced the issue of poverty to the need to control the body and its narratives, an issue whose improvement was impeded by the idea of women as autonomous. As the movement grew, the rhetoric moved away from her early, what we might call anarchist,¹⁰ ideology of sex and increasingly aligned birth control with eugenics.¹¹

Given the spirit of independence in much of *BCR*'s rhetoric, it seems incongruous that the movement embraced a paternalistic ideology of eugenics, a point Sanger's critics hasten to make. Indeed, the narrative of the vitalist maternal body that is deployed throughout *BCR* makes overt the consequences of the desire to see women as autonomous. Thinking of the female body as autonomous does not abstract it from the messiness and mutability of modern life. Instead, it only serves to shift the locus of control away from women. Conversely, thinking of the female body as a public, political tool (for instance, as a means to produce a eugenically superior race of humans) impedes the ability of women to exert private control over their own bodies. So, in a turn that echoes totalitarian politics, Sanger's definition of freedom seems to morph into one of control, particularly for the already oppressed women of lower classes.

Importantly, this rhetorical shift often happened despite Sanger's intentions. Indeed, Sanger was sometimes dismayed by the direction the movement's rhetoric took, particularly in the later years of her involvement. A conference she organized in 1925 provides a telling example. While organizing the event, the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, Sanger deliberately encouraged the participation of eugenics experts. The conference was well attended and received heavy press coverage, but also demonstrated Sanger's inability to control her own creation. Biographer Jean H. Baker explains:

The conference represented a high point of Sanger's advocacy, though her courting of the eugenicists backfired. On the last day the conference voted for a resolution favoring "the general eugenic idea," and encouraging larger families among the "persons whose progeny gives promise of being of decided value to the community." For years Sanger had vehemently opposed such a position. Now she must either offend her principal supporters—a member of her advisory board, Dr. Roswell Johnson, had introduced the resolution—or surrender her convictions. . . . the woman rebel of an earlier decade learned a painful lesson on how realized ambitions bred caution, and success encouraged diplomacy. (193)¹²

Ultimately, then, the narrative got away from Sanger before she had a chance to realize what was happening. Doubleness—the *unheimlich* slippage between same and other—made a successful event also a "painful lesson." Thus, Claire M. Roche's claim that Sanger "was either unable or unwilling to recognize the complicated nature of the association" between eugenics and birth control is at least partly true. Sanger could not have anticipated the direction her early, tentative alignment with eugenics would ultimately take, nor does it seem likely that this supremely confident and independent woman would be willing to acknowledge the possibility that the movement's narrative could be written without her.

Without question, the movement's eugenic turn is troubling from our modern perspective. Yet critics like Angela Franks who believe that Sanger championed "an ideology ultimately destructive of the ideals of female liberation" (8) understate the importance of birth control. Access to female-controlled contraception is an extraordinary advance for the feminist cause because it allows women individual choice in reproductive matters. Further, Sanger was fighting against powerful social forces and had she not cloaked her rhetoric in dramatic language the movement might have been delayed by decades or longer. But this advance did come at a heavy cost, particularly because the narrative appears in an ostensibly feminist publication.

As discussed, the movement's narrative took on a life of its own, but so, too, did Sanger's legacy: she is variously seen today as a champion of feminist causes and the founder of a movement that is "destructive to the ideals of female liberation." In a sense, then, the narrative that is Sanger's life has become vitalist, spawning limitless variations, often without regard for the woman herself. In the version of Sanger's life I have told here, we can see shades of the system builder, the modernist idea of the artist as an architect who builds frames to organize the chaos of modern life. Yet the artist's system invariably fails: W. B. Yeats declares that "the centre cannot hold" (189); T. S. Eliot is left with only "these fragments [he has] shored against [his] ruins" (69); and Ezra Pound, at the end of the *Cantos*, laments that he "cannot make it cohere" (816). So rather than seeing Margaret Sanger as either hypocritical or elitist, as much of the scholarship does, perhaps it is more productive to think of Sanger as a system builder who could not make the center hold, a person trying to control an ultimately uncontrollable narrative.

Understanding the origins of the rhetoric of the early birth-control movement and placing it in the context of a historical moment reminds us that this is socially framed, mutable rhetoric rather than a permanent bulwark of the debate. A feminist awareness of modernism, particularly one inspired by new modernist studies, can shed

light on the role of modernist concerns in setting the agenda well into the twenty-first century for the way we discuss women's bodies, women's rights, and the technologies that impact them. As historian Jill Lepore rightly observes, the arguments on all sides of reproduction debates are so entrenched that progress seems impossible: "We're so fixed and stuck and at this political impasse and have been . . . stuck in it for so long. I think it's easy to lose perspective." Regaining perspective includes recognizing the ways in which this debate has been framed. The stories penned by Vorse and Wellman, situated as they are at the crossroads of feminism, modernism, the gothic, reproductive technology, and eugenics, are far more complex than their melodramatic surfaces might suggest. These narratives refocus the conversation about autonomy by delivering a nuanced and nightmarish version of it. They depict not a simple rejection of autonomy but a reworking of the concept, showing that autonomy's doubleness obscures the ramifications of the desire to abstract "Woman" from the realm of politics and ethics.

Notes

1. For those interested in exploring *Birth Control Review* in greater depth, high-quality PDFs of most issues can be found at www.life-dynamics.com/library, a web page maintained by the anti-abortion organization Life Dynamics.
2. Dodge wrote that Sanger was "the first person I ever knew who was openly an ardent propagandist for the joys of the flesh. This, in those days, was radical indeed when the sense of sin was still so indubitably mixed with the sense of pleasure" (qtd. in Barnet 145).
3. Carole R. McCann succinctly details the Act: "Named for its author, Anthony Comstock, this 1873 amendment to the U. S. Postal Code prohibited the shipping of obscene materials on both public and private freight carriers. All information and devices that could 'be used or applied for preventing conception' were included among the obscene materials proscribed under the law" (23).
4. Due to the restrictions of the Comstock Act, Sanger served thirty days in jail in 1917 for distributing practical birth control instructions (as opposed to arguments about why such distribution should be legal).
5. The first significant revision to the Comstock Act came in 1936 when Sanger helped file a lawsuit that eventually came to be known as *United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries*. According to Joshua Gamson, "the liberalization of federal birth control law was solidified in the One Package case, in which the Second Circuit Court of Appeals literally defined the federal statutes to allow 'the importa-

tion, sale or carriage by mail of things which might intelligently be employed by conscientious and competent physicians for the purpose of saving life and promoting the well being of their patients" (269).

6. An increasing scholarly interest in little magazines has prompted the creation of several online resources dedicated to the archival study of these periodicals. See, for instance, the Modernist Magazines Project (www.modernistmagazines.com) or Brown University's Modernist Journals Project (www.modjournal.org).
7. Sanger's stated intent for the *Birth Control Review* was to "introduce a quieter and more scientific tone [than that of *Woman Rebel*]. . . . We held strictly to education instead of agitation" (*Autobiography* 252). *BCR* is indeed quieter than the *Woman Rebel*, but the claim that *BCR* had no intent to agitate is patently false.
8. Consider, for instance, the relevance of the question "what is life?" in the debate surrounding the emergency contraceptive Plan B. For some individuals, Rob Stein notes, Plan B blurs "the line between abortion and birth control" because various factions question "whether the drug could prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in the womb." As for questions about value and human waste, consider Rush Limbaugh's comments in 2012 about birth control activist Sandra Fluke. Limbaugh sparked a firestorm of debate concerning the way society views women who take birth control. The terms Limbaugh used to describe Fluke—"slut" and "prostitute"—implicitly shift Fluke out of the imagined category of "mother" (Limbaugh claimed that "mothers who use contraception" is an illogical and non-existent phenomenon [See Limbaugh]) and into the category of women valued only for sex (he suggested that women who receive birth control with no co-pay should have to post videos of their sexual encounters online for everyone to watch). While commentators in the mainstream generally condemned these comments, most of the radio stations that carried Limbaugh's show continue to do so (Friedersdorf).
9. Determining the guidelines for eugenic fitness was a matter of constant debate. Sanger had her own ideas for defining fit parents: she believed it reasonable to ask potential parents about their mental and physical health, their income, plans for raising the child, and, finally, to ask the mother, "How are your nerves? What do you know about babies? What kind of a table do you set?" According to Sanger, couples should not begin or should cease reproduction if, for instance, either parent has a "transmissible disease, such as epilepsy, insanity, or syphilis" (*Autobiography* 193).
10. I use this word advisedly. Sanger associated with and was influenced by anarchist ideology in her early days. Furthermore, this particular narrative was often seen by polite society as moral anarchy, as the existence of the Comstock Act attests.
11. Many scholars argue that Sanger adopted eugenics more out of political expediency than personal belief—although her beliefs undoubtedly did lean that way. Claire M. Roche argues, for instance, that

Sanger "marketed herself and her movement as, at times, liberal, leftist, Socialist, and progressive, while she supported and made use of the increasingly elitist views of the eugenicists working in the United States and England" (262). For another argument that reads Sanger's eugenics as pragmatic, see Baker.

12. Baker is making the point that Sanger opposed the idea of birth control as "a mere secondary aspect of eugenics" instead of "a weapon of liberation" (Baker 193).

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