

Sabotaging of Parental Relation in Philip Roth's *Portnoy Complaint*

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Abstract

The relationship of Alexander Portnoy who is the protagonist of Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy Complaint* is critically analysed from the psychoanalytical perspective. His search for power is not power-seeking for its own sake. His sexuality has been his sole sphere of autonomy in family life as a child. It now becomes the means of the assertion of his independence. It is his only way out. Yet he is enmeshed by the definitional constraints of his background, but in an inverted form. Just as it was in order for his family to eat pork in the Chinese restaurant, because the Chinese are excluded from the WASP establishment and therefore are bereft of power in relation to the Jews, so it is that Portnoy is uninterested in sex with the non-powerful-the Hawaiians and Alaskans. His independence resides in the act of intercourse with the powerful. This is why his attempts with Israeli women are complete failures. It is not through some process of identification between his castrating mother and Jewish women in general that they induce impotence in him. It is because they do not fit in with the definitional scheme of things. His sexual potency, and thus his assertion of independence, can only be supported and fulfilled through contact with the powerful as they are defined in the traditional Jewish world-view and Portnoy is trapped because he can only express his desire for independence from the Jewish world against that world and in terms of the Jewish scheme of things. His salvation only makes sense in relation to the Jewish symbolic separation of the Gentiles and the Jews. This is the ultimate irony of the book. He becomes Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity because he never had any human opportunity. He is engaged in exposing unjust practices and unlawful discriminations in New York because he suffered from the same things as he sees them in his family. He is the Jewish joke in the book, but is robbed of the punch-line which is told by someone else: his analyst and representative of the same world. Portnoy's complaint is this: in order to overcome his condition, he must shed the Jewish identity with which he has been imbued. But this would involve the undermining of the channel of his independence sex with the goyim on a compulsive scale which is ironically both his present emancipation from the Jewish world and his imprisonment in its scheme of things. The circle is complete. And why? Because the values, prohibitions and practices which govern the socialization of the child in the Jewish family are at the same time the definers of the ritual separation of the Jews and the Gentiles.

Keywords: Psychoanalytical, Jewish identity, parental relationship, gentile

Paper

Portnoy's Complaint is a psychological novel by Philip Roth first published in 1969. The novel is narrated from the perspective of a teenager who is careless of the social norms and has deep-rooted socio-political ideologies. The novel revolves around the experiences of a lust-ridden, mother-addicted young Jewish bachelor, who confesses to his psychoanalyst in intimate, shameful detail, and coarse, abusive language.

The novel has been critically analysed through the perspective of neurosis. The Portnoys remain in Jersey City until that world out there reveals essential nature of what Jake and Sophie have to conclude:

Just before the war, when the Bund was feeling its oats, the Nazis used to hold their picnics in a beer garden only blocks from our house Then one night a swastika was painted on the front of our building. Then a swastika was found carved into the desk of one of the Jewish children in Hannah's class. And Hannah herself was chased home from school one afternoon by a gang of boys, who it was assumed were anti-Semites on rampage. (56-57)

Maybe they weren't, but why hang around to find out? "This surprises you?" They were asked by Uncle Hymie. "Living surrounded on four sides goyim, and this surprises you? The only place for a Jew to live is among Jews" (57). The "grammatical fathers", "men with deep voices who never use double negatives" (163).

Portnoy, as a child of the forties, what he discovers at the movies-and is as much a child of Hollywood movies as he is of network radio is the gentile/American girl, and that is something he can do about. "O America!" Portnoy rhapsodizes:

America! it may have been gold in the streets of my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memory are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Raye, America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!(164-165).

He is not "asking for the world" (170), just Jane Powell and Debbie Reynolds-"It's the Eddie Fisher in me coming out, that's all, the longing in all us swarthy Jewboys for those bland blond exotics called shiksas"(171). And the Elizabeth Taylor of National Velvet, "this stupendous purple-eyed girl who had the supreme goyische gift of all, the courage and knowhow to get up and ride around on a horse (as opposed having one pull your wagon, like the rag-seller for whom I am named) this girl on the horse with the riding breeches and perfect enunciation"(171). And "the middle-class charms of Margaret O'Brien-that quickness and cuteness around the sparkling eyes the freckled nose" (183). And "the simplicity and plainness, the lower- class availability, the lank blond hair of Peggy Ann Garner" (183). And Jeanne Crain and Kathryn Grayson. In the winter he skates "round and round in circles behind shiksas who live in Irvington, the town across the city line from the ... Jewish quarter" (160). "How do they get so gorgeous, so healthy, so blond?" (162), he wonders. He prepares a name for himself-Alton Peterson, "a name I had picked ... out of the Montclair section of the Essex County phone book-totally goy I was sure Secretly I have been practicing writing 'Alton Peterson' all winter long, practicing on sheets of paper that I subsequently tear from my notebook after school and burn so that they won't have to be explained to anybody in my house"(184).

He can lie about his name, but, he wonders,

how am I going to lie about this fucking nose? You seem like a very nice person ... but why do you go around covering the middle of your face like that? . . . You have got J-E-W written right across the middle of that face- look at the schnozz on him, for God's sakes! That ain't a nose, it's a hose! Screw off, Jewboy! Get off the ice and leave these girls alone! . . . It actually seems that the sprouting of my beak dates exactly from the time that I discovered the shiksas skating in Irvington Park-as though my own nose bone has taken it upon itself to act as my parents' agent! Skating with shiksas? Just you try it, wise guy. Remember Pinocchio? Well, that is nothing compared to what is going to happen to you. They'll laugh and laugh, howl and hoot-and worse, calling you Goldberg in the bargain, send you on your way roasting with fury and resentment. Who do you think they're always giggling about as it is? You! The skinny Yid and his schnozz following them around the ice every single afternoon. (168- 169)

"It's too big!" he complains to his parents. "It gives you character!" his mother tells him. But he does not want character. He wants "The real McCoy in her blue parka and her red earmuffs and her big white mittens-Miss America, on blades! . . . this perfect, perfect-stranger, who is as smooth and shiny and cool as

custard" (170). And everything else that goes with her: "her mistletoe and plum pudding (whatever that may be), and her one-family house with a bannister and a staircase, and parents who are tranquil and patient and dignified, and also a brother Billy who knows how to take motors apart and says 'Much obliged' and isn't afraid of anything physical" (170). What he is attracted to is her "heartiness," her "sturdiness" (245)-she is "so sound" (245), so "rooted" (246). He calls her "The Pumpkin" because she is "the very best of the Middle West" (245). After his life-long "engagement with The Jack and Sophie Portnoy Debating Society," he is amazed that "she never raised her voice in an argument" (244). The "perfect blend of sobriety and good humour" (246), she holds "conversations with dogs, . . . know[s] an elm when [she] see[s] one," has a "father who drives a station wagon," and sports, in the middle of her face, "a Doris Day snout" (261).

Next comes "The Pilgrim, Sarah Abbot Maulsby-New Canaan, Fox-croft, and Vassar" (261). The real version of the reel version of Elizabeth Taylor in *National Velvet*, The Pilgrim has "as companion ... that other flaxen beauty, her palomino" (262). Not only can she ride a horse; she also "knows how to sail a boat" (267), and, according to the "Deb a Day" column in the *New Canaan* newspaper, "'ducks and quails and pheas- ants better scurry' . . . because Sally ... is getting in practice for small game season. Shooting ... is just one of Sally's outdoor hobbies... This summer [she] hopes to try a rod and reel ... on some of the trout that swim by 'Wind-view' her family's summer home" (268). She also, like the perfectly enunciating Elizabeth Taylor, speaks "boarding-school argot" (263). Portnoy is "wowed" (268). It thrills him to know "that generations of Maulsbys were buried in the graveyard at Newburyport, Massachusetts, and generations of Abbotts in Salem. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims' pride Exactly" (267).

For the Pilgrim's "mother's flesh crawled at the sound of the words 'Eleanor Roosevelt' " and The Pilgrim herself "had been dandled on the knee of Wendell Wilkie at Hobe Sound, Florida, in 1942 while [Portnoy's] father was saying prayers for FDR on the High Holidays and [his] mother was blessing him over the Friday night candles" (267). Even better, The Pilgrim's "brother, 'Paunch,' . . . played polo. . . on Sunday afternoons some place in Westchester County, as he had throughout college" (267). "How lucky could I be?" (267), Portnoy crows: The Pilgrim "could have been a Lindabury . . . a daughter of my father's boss!" (267). She is, merely, "a little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the 'colored' district, a little bonus extracted from Boston and Northeastern for all those years of service, and exploitation" (272). How lucky can Portnoy be? Even luckier, because while he is humili- ating "that aristocratic Yankee beauty whose forebears arrived on these shores in the seventeenth century" (262). Yes, indeed, Alexander Portnoy is "one happy yiddel ... a little gang of [his] own, busily exploding Charlie's honor and integrity" busily exploiting Sarah's virtue and gentility, "phenomenon known Hating Your Goy and Eating One Too" (262).

The other movie on bill is, ironically, *Trader Horn*, in which "naked black men and whirl in wild dances" (35), but they are "replaced in [Bigger's] mind images of white men and women dressed in back and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing" (36), and Bigger concludes that they are the "smart people; they [know] how to get hold of money, millions of it" (36).

Never confusing reel life with real life, as Alexander Portnoy and Bigger Thomas do, he avoided "one of the irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed: the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen" (29). Lying on the psychiatrist's couch on the last page of the novel, Portnoy indulges in yet another movie fantasy:

"This is the police speaking. You're surrounded, Portnoy. You better come out and pay your debt to society."

"Up society's ass, copper!"

"Three to come out with those hands of yours up in the air, Mad Dog, or else we come in after you, guns blazing. One."

"Blaze, you bastard cop, what do I give a shit? ..."

"Two."

"At least while I lived, I lived big!" (309)

The novel ends with a fantasized shoot-out with the police. When Portnoy cries to his psychoanalyst, it seems that he is speaking in his own fashion, for many others. The striking thing about Portnoy's Complaint is that it provides a coherent world view of an individual man, the product of a particular generation and religious group, and the wider social conditions in which material achievements are regarded as a major sign of personal success and the source of social esteem. How far Portnoy is representative of others is difficult to know; but if he is, in at least some ways, representative, his complaint may shed some light on problems of identity of a whole generation from the same group. What form these problems take can be appraised by examining the latent structure of meaning in the novel. Alexander Portnoy, thirty-three-year-old Jewish bachelor, lies (we assume) on his analyst's couch, yearning and pleading for deliverance from his tortured existence. He is a harried, oppressed yet self-conscious character whose major, if not sole pleasure lies in sexual gratification of the most varied kind with women who, in one way or another, prove to be unsuitable for the prospect of a permanent relationship. He is afflicted by the constant demands of his parents that he give them 'some pleasure in life' by marrying the right kind of girl, having children, and becoming a respected member of the community. These are precisely the things Portnoy cannot do, certainly not on their terms. Jewish women hold little attraction for him, and when it comes to the crunch, so to speak, they render him sexually impotent. This, of course, precludes the possibility of grandchildren for his parents. The pressures on Portnoy to conform to his parents' idealization of the Jewish son are applied directly and indirectly. How can Portnoy, who is, after all, only Assistant Commissioner, satisfy his parents, whose happiness and acceptance of Portnoy depends upon his success in the community? Yet he is not making himself happy through following any alternative course of action. The sexual pleasure he receives from the series of non-Jewish women is short-term and dangerous, for he is constantly thinking about other women and the millions of female bodies he has not yet assailed, and he is haunted by the fear that his behaviour will lead to public exposure and scandal. Portnoy's dilemma is that he faces two alternatives almost equally unsatisfying and untenable: one, that he comply with his parents' wishes, thus getting them off his back but incurring his own permanent displeasure; two, that he pursue short-lived and specific satisfactions which involve the constant complaints of his parents and which, he fears, will lead to his public unmasking as some kind of sexual pervert. He has determinedly turned his back on the former possibility, is compelled to pursue the latter, yet yearns for a third alternative which is not forthcoming. Though he clearly understands his situation, Portnoy is reduced to continual feelings of personal doubt and anguish, anticipations of disaster, parental oppression and passing affairs which provide the sole gratification of eroticism. Why should this be so? The explanation would appear, at first sight, to lend itself to a Psychoanalytic interpretation, but not because the novel is set in the convention of a 'shrink's' case-study or because the patient expresses himself in the appropriate terminology.

While this approach would shed a great deal of light on the problem, Portnoy's condition, I shall argue, can only be understood in terms of the multi-faceted experience and significance of being socialized in a peculiarly distinctive family setting. And this setting itself makes sense only in terms of the distinctions made and the ritualistic relationships developed between the world of the Jews and the world of the Goyim (non-Jews). To understand this argument, it is necessary to consider some of the typical features of life in the shtetls of nineteenth-century eastern Europe and the problems confronting Jewish immigrants in the United States, and to see these experiences as a background to the characteristic modes of upbringing which these experiences heavily influenced. If it can be put briefly, the insecurity of shtetl life rested upon a number of factors. He is completely constricted by a sense of danger: his father's anxieties about work, his headaches and constipation, his mother's worries about his father, her prohibitions on eating out and apprehensions over ill-health. He fails to comprehend the strength of her reactions to his bad behaviour. Why should a child of five be asked to leave home, to be put outside in his coat, with the door closed and locked behind him? He doesn't even understand why his behaviour is bad. He is simply aware of being smothered in his mother's constant presence. His only pleasures are enjoyed when he can be left alone, to play baseball and to masturbate. And the latter, he fears, will induce cancer or send him blind. Masturbation

and sexual fantasies become his sole sphere of autonomy. As a grown man, he comes to find that the way out of the constricting familial environment is through the one channel of independence he has always possessed, which now takes the form of intercourse with non-Jewish women. The nature of familial constriction and the importance of sex with the shiksas are two factors which require explanation. Both have obsessed and continue to obsess the man, and both run like leit-motifs through the book. They can be shown to be inextricably related in terms of the symbolic significance attributed to the distinction between the Jewish community and the Gentile community. The Jewish world is defined and controlled by dietary laws which stipulate what can be eaten and what cannot be eaten and to some extent how food is to be eaten. Consumption of the wrong food threatens ill-health. Mrs Portnoy suspects her son of eating out. The humiliating sarcasm of the mother aside, the significance of this conversation lies in the double meaning of the term *chazerai*. It means literally 'piggishness', and is attached to abominations of food and mess, dirt or confusion in general. Contrasted to Jewish cleanliness and order, forbidden and therefore polluting food and disorder are *chazerai*: they partake of the realm of the *Goyim*. In other words, there is a direct symbolic association amongst non-Jewish customs, forbidden food, disorder, filth, pollution and ill-health. Portnoy wearies of the warnings of the consequences of contact with the realm of the *Goyim*. It can be seen further that while safety emanates from Jewishness, danger and fear emanate from non-Jewishness. But there is more.

Contact with *goyische* practices, then, leads to unpredictability, the counterpart of disorder. In this unpredictability, furthermore, there resides power. The Jews are socially impotent, despite their ethical superiority, and assume an appeasing attitude towards the powerful. Finally, the outside world represents unbridled pleasure-seeking of the kind forbidden to Jews. This can be seen clearly in the episode in which Portnoy, unable to confess any belief in religion, refuses to go to synagogue with his family. His refusal provokes from his father neither resignation, nor an attempt at persuasion, nor a single rebuke, but a series of abusive claims: that Portnoy is wearing unclean if not indecent clothes, that he starts looking like a human being, that he is ignorant and his success at school is in some way perverse, that he has no respect nor love for his father, nor any respect for the Jewish people, their learning, their suffering and their history. By one specific attempt at independence, Portnoy, amidst the tears of all present, invokes upon himself a devastating and total attack. Separation and distancing of children from the outside world produces a trained incompetence towards it, comprised of a physical, emotional and social incapacity. When the parents of a non-Jewish girl-friend, with whom he has been staying, say 'good morning' to him (a term never used in the Portnoy household, where communication assumes the form of argument and vilification), he is so surprised and incapacitated that he can only say 'thank you' in reply. He has been brought up to be polite, "Mother, I am too moral to the bursting point--just like you! Did you ever see me try to smoke a cigarette? I look like Bette Davis. Today boys and girls not even old enough to be bar-mitzvahed are sucking on marijuana like its peppermint candy, and I'm still all thumbs with a Lucky Strike" (124). Because the outside world is so incomprehensible, it calls forth an ineptness in dealing with it. The unknown becomes synonymous with the fearful. For all the help they gave him in becoming worldly, Portnoy claims he might have well been brought up by Hottentots and Zulus. This fearful sense of life, we can see, was the product and heritage of the historical separation of the Gentiles and the Jews, their ritual relationships of danger, fear and pollution, and the development of a world-view which held out the promise of safety from the outside in the observance of rules of religious significance. It was, and is, a total system of social organization and personal identity, and can be represented diagrammatically.

Yet it is not always the case that rule embodies a total assault on relationship with the outside world no longer endangered:

Why we can eat pig on Pell Street frankly I still haven't got the whole time I believe it has largely to do who owns the place, and whom drick', isn't somebody whose opinion about. Yes, the only people in the world whom it seems to me the Jews are not afraid of are the Chinese. Because, one, the way they speak English makes my father sound like Lord Chesterfield; two, the insides of their heads are

just so much fried rice anyway; and three, to them we are not Jews but white-and maybe even Anglo-Saxon. Imagine! No wonder the waiters can't intimidate us. To them we're just some big-nosed variety of WASP! Boy, do we eat! Suddenly, even the pig is no threat.... (90).

What happens to Portnoy is that he falls away from the rules and rituals of Jewish life and experiences a progressive entry into the manifold realm of goyische practices. It all begins, he tells us, with the breaking of one dietary law-eating lobster-in the wrong context, away from home:

Did I mention that when I was fifteen I took it out of my pants and whacked off on the bus from New York? ... Now, maybe the lobster is what did it. That taboo so easily and simply broken, confidence may have been given to the whole slimy, suicidal Dionysian side of my nature; the lesson may have been learned that to break the law, all you have to do is-just go ahead and break it! (78-9)

Now, at the age of thirty-three, his only pleasure is in intercourse with forbidden women. He speaks of three: Mary Jane Reed, whom he calls The Monkey; Kay Campbell, The Pumpkin; and Sarah Abbott Maulsby, The Pilgrim. They are not just Gentile women: they are more like a representative sample of the class and regional structure of Christian American Womanhood. Mary Jane Reed, from the coalmines of West Virginia, is pure proletarian and rural; Kay Campbell has a mid-West, respectable middle-class background (her father is a real estate agent and town councillor); and Sarah Abbott Maulsby is an upper-class New England descendant of the earliest Protestant settlers. Portnoy's sexuality is, in fact, an expression of his search for power, a power that he feels he can acquire personally through erotic contact with the WASPS:

What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds-as though through fucking I will discover America. Conquer America-maybe that's more like it. Columbus, Captain Smith, Governor Winthrop, General Washington-now Portnoy. As though my manifest destiny is to seduce a girl from each of the forty-eight states. As for Alaskan and Hawaiian women, I really have no feelings either way, no scores to settle, no coupons to cash in, no dreams to put to rest-who are they to me, a bunch of Eskimos and Orientals? (235)

Thus, encroachment into the Gentile world entails violations of those values, prohibitions and practices which have been the mechanisms of the development of social identity. These values, prohibitions and practices have a total and multivalent quality: reference to one involves the same intellectual, emotional and moral responses as does reference to all others. Thus, when one is invoked, all are invoked; when one is threatened, all are threatened. The only meaningful relationship with the world, and the source and structure of identity, is to be found in this divorce of the two realms and the interlaced and multivalent aspects within each. The ritual relationships between the two are changed only when its basis -the power relationship-is perceived as changed. It is under this condition that the Jewish world-view is in danger of collapse. But so long as the uneven power relationship is seen to remain, it continues as the foundation of both separation and the distinctive problem of identity with which Portnoy, in the refusal to accept his assigned position, is confronted. This is the latent structure of meaning which emerges from Roth's novel.

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