

PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT:
AN INDICTEMENT AGAINST JEWISHNESS?

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Throughout his writing career, the American Jewish writer Philip Roth has always been accused, especially by Jewish leaders and rabbis and also by some literary critics, of being self-hating and an anti-Semite. Needless to say that this has been the result of Roth's treatment of Judaism in the many novels he has so far published and, obviously, also the result of his being a Jew. In this aspect, one of his most polemical novels is beyond any doubt *Portnoy's Complaint*, originally published in 1969.

In the word *complaint*, to which the title refers, it can be already seen an anti-Semitic element. In the opinion of the American critic Sanford Pinsker, it is "an indictment handed down against those cultural forces that have created [someone]..." (Pinsker, 1982). The structure of *Portnoy's Complaint* undoubtedly reflects this significance. Narrated by a psychiatric analysand, the novel is written in a flashback/flash-forward style, in the first person singular, and with a loose and colloquial language. Lying down on a couch, Alexander Portnoy, the protagonist, tells Dr. Spielvogel his inner conflicts and some occurrences of his past which he identifies as being their causes.

Portnoy's conflict is basically a matter of cultural misplacedness. Having been raised up under the influence of two different cultures, he does not manage to achieve a complete identification with either of them. In his attempt of self-understanding, he points out two factors which have played a tremendously important role in his life and have made him the kind of person he is a now: his parents and the religious education they gave him.

Portnoy is a Jew, or at least he is the member of a Jewish family. Throughout his life, he has never been deeply attached to his parents' religion. He literally denies and refuses to accept their beliefs. However, more than mere words will be necessary for him to get rid of religious influence on his life, if ever he does.

To begin with, Jewishness is a part of Portnoy's being even in his physical characteristics. This is something he has to share with his relatives in spite of his refusal to follow their religion. Although there is not a detailed physical depiction of the Jewish characters in *Portnoy's Complaint*, we can still observe that they have been attributed

some traits which are traditionally attributed to the Jewish stereotype. Two of these characteristics are especially significant: the characters' hair and nose.

Like the Jewish stereotype, Portnoy's and his father's hair is "a wilde bush the color and texture of steel wool" or, as Portnoy describes it in another passage a "kinky black Hebe hair"¹ (PC, 49)

But certainly the nose of these characters described several times with terms such as "big" and "long bumpy" and "that eloquent appendage," is their most evident Jewish physical characteristic. Such a peculiarity seems to become too evident in a society where the majority of people have a quite different nose shape. At least this is the way Portnoy faces it. It has become an obsession of his to compare his big and beaky nose with the WASPs' which, unlike his, "is hardly even there" (PC, 118) and "points out northward automatically at birth" (PC, 134).

Nevertheless, Portnoy's hair and nose are neither the only nor the strongest reminder of his cultural and religious identity. His parents are definitely the most intense and vivid presence of Judaism in his life. Even when physically absent, they are still present in Portnoy's mind, not allowing him to forget his religious bonds for a single moment. This, in fact, is an experience shared by most Jewish children which, as the critic Gerson Shaked suggests has become a recurrent theme in Jewish literature (Shaked, 1988).

This imposition of religion becomes an almost unbearable burden for Portnoy, especially for involving a rivalry with the gentiles. As a Jewish child, therefore supposed to consider himself different from the majority for being a member of the Chosen People, Portnoy is constantly demanded to demonstrate he is superior to the gentile children. His performance, especially in his social and academic life, should be an example to be followed by anyone. In fact, these demands on him are only part of a process apparently well-known by Jews and which Allan Warren Friedman calls "'the Einstein syndrome,' which proclaims (as any Jewish mother will tell you) that all Jewish boys are born brilliant" (Friedman, 1982).

Such kind of demands from Jewish parents should be taken as corehent, especially if they live in the USA, a society known for the strong competition among its citizens. Nevertheless, since it has as its strongest prompting element a religious and ethnic rivalry, it in reality becomes a setback for their children's integration into this

¹ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 49; Further citations from this novel will be given in the text as PC followed by their page number.

society to which, regardless their creed or ethnic group, they belong. Besides, this attitude goes against what American Jews like Portnoy learn in their academic life. That is, they live in a country ruled by the principle of equality among men and in this same country their people have never undergone discrimination or persecution as they had in the Old World.

Thus, it is for their role in this cultural conflict that Jewish parents become detestable tyrants to their children. With an impressive image, Portnoy describes the resentment these children feel toward their parents. He sees himself and the other Jewish children as prisoners “moaning and groaning” in their bunks while “rolling through (...) heavy seas of guilt” (PC, 110).

Yet, this situation is not merely a difficult parent-child relationship. There is a strong element determining the way it is: religion. Jack and Sophie, Portnoy’s parents, are the embodiment of Judaism, with its values and traditions, in the life of their son. In Shaked’s view, Portnoy’s relationship and dependence on his parents is more than just that of an adult with his parents. It resembles that of a Jewish member with the leaders of his tribe (Shaked, 1988).

However, it is not only for passing their religious values and traditions to his son that Jack and Sophie are such tyrants for Portnoy. It is the exaggeration with which they pursue their objective of making him a nice Jewish boy. They watch every detail of their son’s life. Their worries involve all aspects of his life such as eating, clothing, friendships, career, marriage, etc. This situation continues even when Portnoy becomes an adult. In his present life, at the age of thirty-three and living in New York, Portnoy has to call up his parents every day to appease their affliction about his welfare.

Although both his parents have such a marked presence in Portnoy’s life, it is undeniably Sophie who has influenced, or better say, “smothered” him the most. Indeed, the first chapter of the novel “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Met” is entirely dedicated to her character. The narrator opens it saying: “She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise” (PC, 07). In the same way, along his whole life, Portnoy will always feel the presence of his mother around him. She becomes a kind of voice in his mind that reinforces his inner conflicts and reminds him constantly of his Jewish status.

Sophie, as a typical Jewish mother, stands for the beliefs, traditions, and ways of thinking of her people in the life of her son. In this sense, she and her husband are a

constant reminder to Portnoy that their law should never be broken no matter the strength of a possible justification to do it. That's why, understandably, Portnoy shouts at his parents almost in despair: "I happen also to be a human being!" (PC, 72).

With such a view of the law and its consequent behavior, Jewish parents, as the embodiment of their people's values and traditions in the life of their children, show what their religion expect of them. That is, a blind obedience and an acceptance of their rules and regulations as eternal verities. Thus, a Jew should never see his life as being more important than his religious principles.

Aware of this strong trait in the Jewish tradition, one can well understand the tragic outcome of parent-children relationship in *Portnoy's Complaint*. The two cases that are narrated besides Portnoy's itself, Ronald's suicide and Heshie's argument with his family, have an unhappy conclusion. In both of them, the children eventually die early in life as a direct or indirect consequence of their relationship with their parents.

Ronald's last act is a strong indication that his suicide has really something to do with the pressure put on him by his parents to be "good" and "nice." Before dying he leaves a message to his mother saying a friend of hers had called about the rules for that night's game. This evinces how great it was the influence of his parents on him. Even in face of committing suicide he was unable to rebel against them.

In the case of Heshie, Portnoy's cousin, the reason for his argument with his family is Alice Dembosky, his gentile girl-friend. Revolted against his father's direct interference to stop their courtship, Heshie has a fight against him. But, in spite of being physically superior to his father, Heshie willingly capitulates to him and resigns to his family's imposition. Soon after, he goes to the war where he dies.

Reflecting upon his cousin's attitude, Portnoy senses there is "some enigma at its center, a profound moral truth" (PC, 62) which he cannot grasp. Beyond doubt, this enigma and moral truth Portnoy tries to understand is the reason why someone should abdicate his happiness and dignity on account of a set of rules and regulations imposed by his parents and their traditions.

In face of their hard reality, Portnoy's attitude, however, is very different from Ronald's and Heshie's. He decides to fight against his parents and their traditions for his own autonomy what is already a denial of his people's tradition. Besides, his ideal of freedom adds up to his assimilation of some elements of the larger American culture. Unlike his people's tradition, Portnoy's academic life has taught him the necessity and value of fighting for one's own freedom.

Nevertheless, to abandon his Jewishness totally is not an easy task for a Jewish-educated boy. Although no longer performing the rituals and observances of his religion, Portnoy cannot take its influence out of his inner self since Jewishness is already deeply rooted in him. It is now like a ghost haunting his existence and filling him with guilt feeling for not conforming to it. This is manifested in the fact that he always brings out his Jewishness in his arguments with gentile girl-friends which, in Shaked's words, is the attitude of a man who is still a member of his tribe (Shaked, 1988).

Portnoy becomes, thus, a man divided between two different cultures. He can neither accept one and despise the other completely nor reconcile both of them. The kind of person he becomes as an adult reflects this lack of equilibrium in his cultural identity. He is professionally and intellectually successful, but emotionally he is still dependent on his parents. It seems that his intellect will never beat his emotions and so he is condemned to suffer the influence of his parents for his lifetime. He recognizes that, like other Jewish children, he is meant to be a little child as long as his parents live because "a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy till they die!" (PC, 103).

Taking a look at the life story of Portnoy and those two other Jewish boys, we are led to two conclusions. First of all, it reveals the influence Jewish parents have over their children regardless the kind of person they are or their physical or intellectual capacity. They will never get entirely rid of their parents. Secondly, Portnoy's is a representation of an experience undergone by many other people like him, i.e., third-generation educated American Jews. In this way, his story fits in with Baugarten and Gottfried's assertion that "in Roth's work individual events become representative of the experiences of the group, for his subject is not one character's life but the life experiences of a generation." (Baugarten, 1980).

But, as we have already seen, Portnoy definitely refuses to play the role of the nice Jewish boy. He does not accept to become what his parents want him to be. And, as it should be expected, this rebellion of his also spreads out to what his parents represent in his life: Jewish traditions and values. In his revolt, Portnoy makes ironies and despises some of the most basic traditions and values of Judaism such as the doctrine of the Chosen People and the dietary laws. However, it should be said that in his revolt against some elements of his parents' religion, Portnoy questions them from a social and psychological perspective. In other words, he does not question them as eternal

verities but rather as obstacles to his social and psychological development and integration with his countrymen. It is in their implications in the life of an American Jew living in a WASP-dominated society that those elements are approached.

This can be already observed in Portnoy's treatment of the dietary laws. For Portnoy, these laws have lost their original meaning and become a ritual with just negative consequences for one's individual and social lives. In what concerns the individual, the dietary laws work as a factor that blocks one's personal development. Portnoy says: "What else, I ask you, were all those prohibitive dietary rules and regulations all about to begin with, what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed?" (PC, 75). It is obvious that for Portnoy the dietary laws only mean to make passivity and renunciation characteristics of the Jew's personality, perpetuating, in this way, a marked part of the Jewish heritage which is so negative in his view. On the other hand, the social negativity of the dietary laws consists in segregating the Jews from their gentile neighbors. In Portnoy's view, by keeping this tradition the Jews are more interested in reinforcing their segregation from the gentiles than in religious motives.

Portnoy's approach to the dietary laws has a similarity with his approach to another very significant aspect of the Jewish theology: the doctrine of the Chosen People. The basic assumption of this doctrine is that the Jews were chosen by God to serve him and also perform a universal service to mankind. In Portnoy's view, the acceptance of such a doctrine has acquired the same social connotation of the dietary laws: it has become a barrier which reinforces the segregation between Jews and gentiles. Their religious status of Chosen People makes some Jews assume an arrogant attitude towards the gentiles whom they consider "another breed on human being entirely!" (PC, 173). This is Jack and Sophie's conception and it is also one of the main characteristics of the education they give to their son. Portnoy says about it: "But I am something more, or so they tell me. A Jew" (PC, 69)

By expressing all those attitudes towards Judaism and its tradition in his most polemical novel, it is easy to understand why Roth was often charged of anti-Semitism. However, taking a look beyond the mere opposition Jews versus gentiles, we can see that Roth's intention is not to attack directly his own religion but rather to show how a bigot approach to religion can damage the life of an individual. A clear indication of this is the destination he gives, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, to its protagonist. In an attempt to solve this misplacedness of his and conciliate with his people's culture, Portnoy goes to

a totally Jewish environment: Israel. But there, he finds out it is not yet the answer he is looking for. Even in a place where he is totally surrounded by other Jews, a place where everybody he sees is Jewish like himself, a place where the Jews are “the WASPs” (PC, 231), Portnoy still feels lonely and misplaced. Having an argument with an Israeli girl, he says: “Yes, Naomi, I am soiled, Oh, I am impure and also pretty fucking tired, my dear, of never being good enough for the Chosen People!” (PC, 242). In other words, no matter how much and how good he does, Portnoy is always dissatisfied and unhappy with himself. The kind of religious education he received has made him a misplaced person both among other Jews and among the gentiles. In other words, his disillusionment in Israel denotes that his sense of alienation when he is in the USA is rather a direct consequence of his inadequate religious education than of his being specifically a Jew living in a gentile-dominated society.

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