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## Portnoy's Complaint. Lust, trust, and the English language

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**Abstract:** Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is more than an intricate and complex soliloquy on relationships, sexuality, fantasies and human nature; the novel plays with language, with misshapen forms of speech, with misused words, with fragmented or out-of-balance discourses while, at the same time, conveying the sometimes chaotic, sometimes frightening existential narrative of the egotistic and intelligent Alex. Talking to his doctor, he enters an abyssal spiral of shame, guilt, Oedipal compulsions and alienations that require no solutions, no answers – his therapy is not cathartic, it is merely explanatory.

**Keywords:** complex, language, relationships, sexuality

'A man has got to have an umbrella for a rainy day' (2016: 9) is what Alexander's father (Philip Roth's character from *Portnoy's complaint*) used to tell him, and, intricately enough, Alex chose to carry one of the most compelling yet odd umbrellas in American literature: religion, innate promiscuity, intelligence. Alex Portnoy's therapeutic monologue reveals not only the puzzled, hectic but intriguing approach to his sexuality or carnal fantasies or failures, but, more importantly, it uncovers his confused and blurred view on love, trust and faith. Whether we refer to his ephemeral sexual liaisons or to his relationship with the Jewish religion, we meet the same angry, dissatisfied, arrogant and disillusioned Alex. In his own carefully-constructed narrative, he subjects himself to painful recollections, to reliving the guilt, the anger, the mockery, the glacial submission to his parents – but is this cathartic or potentially dangerous? In Jonathan K. Foster's *Memory. A Very Short Introduction* we read that individuals are less likely to accurately remember familiar objects, faces or events than they are to remember in great detail events or people that seem out of the ordinary, that stand

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out one way or another. The way Alex approaches *language* and the way he connects patterns of speech, accents or even misused words to flashbacks from his past could only lead us to the assumption that language is the red string between his *self* and his *desired self*, the one he is destined to meet someday.

Alex Portnoy's Postmodern condition forces him to aimlessly bounce from excitement to disgust, from moral imprisonment to a false sense of freedom, from apparent sanity to a sometimes-inescapable psychological instability; he is the product of numerous troubled relationships. The novel is a labyrinth of emotions, despair and decay where neither rebellion, nor compliance, wealth or fidelity can save you. The Postmodern crisis of man and the fragmented identity of the individual in the Postmodern context have an intimate, almost carnal relationship to the psychological burdens and mental nakedness of the alienated individual, allowing him the space and time to fight against them, but not the weapons to win. – Lyotard argues that words are of great importance in the postmodern world, for everything is founded and rooted in language games, and rules are imposed on language as such. He states that "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it" (73).

Alex seems to live in a simulacrum that he is desperately trying to escape; his therapy session with the doctor might be his last attempt at grasping reality, at transcending his fantasies and imagination and setting foot in the real world. He forces us to join him in his journey towards the real world, but is there a *truth* he is so ardently trying to unravel, or is he trying to justify his existence? He might be looking for solutions to his distorted narrative of life, or he might just be completing the work? Roger Horrocks, in *Freud Revisited: Psychoanalytic Themes in the Postmodern Age*, emphasizes the concept of the unbalanced condition of man in the Postmodern life, underlying the relativity and ambiguity of the man in relation to the world and to himself. He says that

Postmodernist thought can certainly be seen as antithetical to psychoanalysis, since it offers a resistance to notions of 'truth', 'depth' or any kind of discourse being privileged (...) Postmodernism offers us a kind of relativism – there are no absolute truths, there are no 'grand narratives', but rather a number of 'little stories' (16)

Given the fact that we imagine him sitting nervously in his doctor's office, we might be inclined to argue that Alex is ready to find answers

and face consequences; on the other hand, since the doctor he is confiding in is a silent observer of Alex's zigzags through his own existence, we dare say that Alex's neurotic confession is his means of trying to cope with both the real world and the simulacrum that has become tightly twisted around his identity.

Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy, the Jewish embodiment of the Oedipal complex, the vaguely psychotic genius, the unmarried 33-year-old, follows a well-structured pattern in creating his tragic misery: the turbulent and violent liaison with anything that could imply even the slightest form of commitment on his part is at the core of his eerie and discontent nature. Thus, he resorts to arrogantly mocking and satirizing everything and anything that might hold power over him – the rabbis, his transient girlfriends, even his psychotherapist. He views both love and religion – even though at times he seems to deflect and, dare we say, long for a superficial purity and integrity that could be attained through marriage and religion – as the society's way of subjugating him, as an imprisonment, both physical and mental, that would only halt, but not stop, his true nature, his exquisitely-constructed idea of *self*.

Alex Portnoy is aware of his limitations, but he cannot grasp his flaws; throughout his monologue he persistently asks questions and raises concerns, but they are all for his ego – for he does not allow the doctor to answer. He is both the therapist and the patient – he accounts his story uninterruptedly, he cares not for any insights from the doctor, and his questions to the silent (or silenced?) therapist are mere markers of discourse for our educated, cultivated Alex: 'Doctor, why, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son?' (14), 'Doctor, what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred ... or the love?' (19), 'Doctor, what do you call this sickness I have?' (24).

Why can't we hear the doctor? Why isn't he allowed to speak during the session? Why is he silent and why can't – or wouldn't – he interrupt Alex's constant leaps through time, emotion and memory? Umberto Eco discusses 'noise' and 'silence' as possible threats of and towards mankind, as possible weapons against ignorance and as possible means to escape reality, saying that

This great need for noise is like a drug; it is a way to avoid focusing on what is really important (...) one of the ethical problems we face today is how to return to silence (...) – in other words, the long pause, silence as creation of suspense, silence as a threat, silence as agreement, silence as denial, silence in music (132-133)

One possible answer could be that Alex thrives in the silence of his

peers: he prefers them not to speak, he would rather have them silent rather than speaking improperly. Among his more-than-obvious obsessions and shortcomings – his Oedipal complex, his doomed status as the submissive Jewish son, his tragic compliance and obedience to his parents, his meaningless sexual encounters, his ritualic fascination with himself – we find that he fosters a powerful and compulsive relationship with *language*. Language is capable of drawing him closer to love, trust and faith, and, at the same time, it is powerful enough to irrevocably shatter any possible emotion. Alex is as fascinated with sexuality as he is with language – language can be an aphrodisiac, it can astound and bewilder, but it can also disgust, vex and repel. Whenever something comes dangerously close to him, he takes his father's advice and opens up another umbrella: the English language. He turns *the others* and their improper use of the English language into enemies for, as Umberto Eco discusses in *Inventing the enemy*,

'having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against to which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our worth. So, when there is no enemy, we have to invent one. (...) and so we are concerned here not so much with the almost natural phenomenon of identifying an enemy who is threatening to us, but with the process of creating and demonizing the enemy' (2)

Why the English language? Because his tormented state, his chaotic existence started with confusion over the English language. He links the misfortunate use of language to embarrassment, to shame, to humiliation; moreover, he naturally links it to his mother and his childhood. The misemployment of language stirs up nauseating emotions for Alex, and one might say that his mother is to blame – his first recollection of agony and suffering – emotional and intellectual – goes back to first grade, when, he says,

'I was asked by the teacher one day to identify a picture of what I know perfectly well my mother referred to as a 'spatula'. But for the life of me I could not think of the word in English. Stammering and flushing, I sank defeated into my seat (...) and that's how far back my fate goes, how early in the game it was 'normal' for me to be in a state resembling torment' (53)

He has thus made language his best friend and one of the most vicious enemies of his own reality. Language is both the disease and the antidote, just as he is both the patient and the doctor; language is means of satire, mockery, it is one of the pillars of his alienated

existence. He needs to justify his emotional withdrawal, his spiritual discontent, his self-proclaimed intellectual superiority, thus he needs a weapon – what better weapon could there be? Language is both harmless and harmful, and, as he is to discover, ‘conversation isn’t just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you’ve got to duck for your life and aim to kill! Words aren’t only bombs and bullets – no, they’re little gifts, containing meanings!’ (114). Words are little gifts, indeed, provided that they are used properly and carefully, they are wonderful if caressed, cherished and gently threaded one after another; in Alex’s reality, words are defining, they are crucial in the making of any relationship: even though, as an adolescent, he dwells in the grey zone when it comes to religion, transgressing the questioning-the-existence-of-God phase, we realize that it is not God that he has issues with, but the rabbis. Even so, there are references to the importance of the proper use of language during one of his spiritual crises: ‘there is no such thing as God, and there never was, and I’m sorry, but in my vocabulary that’s a lie’ (36). His rant about God and religion is not only teenage rage, but also a revolt against his father; he is told to change clothes in order to go with his father to the Synagogue, and the implied uncleanness of his shirt, and of himself, is what sends Alex into this aggravated, hectic and somewhat pointless wrath. He is desperately, but most of the time silently, trying to escape the psychological chains that his parents restrain him in, wondering when and if his submission would end, and, at the same time, he rebels against everything else that might have the power to control him emotionally. His parents’ restrictions are all he allows – or all he can bear. He, the Jewish son, yields only to his parents, for

‘inhibition doesn’t grow on trees, you know – takes patience, takes concentration, takes a dedicated and self-sacrificing parent and a hard-working attentive little child to create in only a few years’ time a really constrained and tight-ass human being’ (45).

It is not God that upsets him, it is not God that he despises, but the rabbis – due to the way they use language. His fourteen-year-old self despises rabbis for the work they do, for the money they earn, for their superficiality and moral superiority, but, more importantly, he loathes hearing them speak; referring to a rabbi, he describes him as ‘*a man who somewhere along the line got the idea that the basic unit of meaning in the English language is the syllable. So no word he pronounces has less than three of them, not even the word God*’ (42). Alex does pick a fight with religion and spirituality, a battle that would lose intensity over the years but that does not seem to cease, however,

but he goes to war with rabbis. Paradoxically enough, he asks God to spare the world of His spiritual leaders:

‘I-a wan-tt to-a wel-come-a you-ew too thee sy-no-gawg-a.’ Oh God, oh Gud-ah-duh, if you’re up there shining down your countenance, why not spare us from here on out the enunciation of the rabbis! Why not spare us the rabbis themselves! (42).

Similarly, one of his long-term girlfriends who ardently longs to marry Portnoy one day, and whom he nicknames The Monkey, suffers from the same incorrect-use-of-language disease, a disease that would gradually become unbearable and incurable for Alex. She does correspond to his sexual fantasies and desires, she is as troubled and fascinated with the possibilities that their imagination can offer, but she is found unfit for him due to her handwriting. Once she gets too close, once she crosses the boundaries of an ephemeral relationship and tries connecting with Alex on a deeper, more intimate level, he uses her untidy spelling and calligraphy not only against her, but against any further emotional connection:

‘I don’t think I’ve spoken of the disproportionate effect The Monkey’s handwriting used to have upon my psychic equilibrium. What hopeless calligraphy! It looked like the work of an eight-year-old – it nearly drove me crazy! Nothing capitalized, nothing punctuated – only those oversized irregular letters of hers slanting downward along the page, then dribbling off (...) And the spelling! (...) dear as in the salutation of a letter: d-e-r-e. Or d-e-i-r’ (96)

Another ‘*gentile heart broken*’ by Alex was Sarah Abbott Maulsby, a tall, educated and beautiful young woman whose argot was used as a shield between her and our main character; her choice of vocabulary was unbearable for Alex, it was more than he could handle. Hadn’t it been for her argot, would he have married her? We dare guess no, for he would have found another instance of improper English, a word she pronounces wrongly, a letter she shapes oddly, a sound she aspirates too roughly when she speaks. Leaving our assumptions aside, he does justify not marrying her:

Why didn’t I marry the girl? Well, there was her cutesy-wootsy boarding school argot, for one. Couldn’t bear it. ‘Barf’ for vomit, ‘ticked off’ for angry, ‘a howl’ for funny, ‘crackers’ for crazy, ‘teeny’ for tiny. Oh, and ‘divine’. (What Mary Jane Reed means by ‘groovy’ – I’m always telling these girls how to talk right, me with my five-hundred-word New Jersey vocabulary)’ (119)

We have already mentioned that Alex accepts and embraces his limitations; he knows he uses foul language, he knows he uses argot that might be troublesome for others, but his being aware of his words and using them in a proper, adequate manner, disqualifies him from being as ignorant and oblivious as *the others*. He is superior, morally and intellectually, because he uses the right word at the right time – he does not stutter, he does not elongate the vowels, he does not emphasize syllables, he does not have a peculiar accent. He has integrated perfectly into the American society (he is discovering it in his own sexual, carnal, promiscuous way, he says, one girl at a time); in his troubled, alienated way, he sometimes feels like he does fit in. Even so, he fits in from a distance – denying any form of real human connection, shielding himself behind language, he remains the alien Jew with an Oedipal complex.

One could argue that there is nothing more intimate, personal, and complex than one's relation to his spiritual leader, to his partner, to his doctor. But one's relation to the language he speaks is, dare we say, even more miscellaneous, frightening and deep, for it fosters the very idea of *identity* – and Alex's identity is, undoubtedly, shaped and altered by the language he identifies through.

These relationships should harbour no shame, no boundaries, no limits, for they imply an almost empowering sense of secrecy, openness, confidentiality, trust. It is this type of intimacy that frightens and freezes Alex, and that forces him to raise icy walls around himself. He despises rabbis due to the way they lengthen every word, he dislikes The Monkey due to her calligraphy, he hates Sarah's argot, thus they are not to be trusted, they are not to be loved, they are to be discarded of. They are a means to an end: enraging your parents, fulfilling sexual fantasies, allowing your freedoms to know no limits. Will he trust Doctor Spielvogel? We have asked ourselves in the beginning whether his therapy session would be cathartic or potentially dangerous, whether Alex is trying to find answers or justify, under specialized supervision, his behaviour, his fantasies, his compulsions. Doctor Spielvogel's broken English unravels the answer: 'Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?' (140).

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