

Firing into the Dark: Sexual Warfare in *Portnoy's Complaint*

From the moment he first retreats to the bathroom and grabs his “battered battering ram to freedom”¹ at novel’s inception to his wrestling match with Naomi, the Israeli lieutenant, at its conclusion, Alexander Portnoy is at war and sex is his weapon. Whether whacking off with buddies Smolka and Mandel, or directly engaging the enemy—Bubbles Girardi, Sally Maulsby, or Mary Jane Reed—sex is Alex’s way of refusing to live someone else’s idea of what it means to be good. Indeed, the “liberation” of his “libidinous Paris”² requires forbidden acts; to Alex, being bad means being free. And while Roth seems fully aware of the negative consequences of such immature, neurotic behavior, he apparently sees no other way for Alex to resist his mother’s smothering control. Indeed, *Portnoy's Complaint* clearly demonstrates that those who enter the combat zone halfheartedly, or who refuse to enlist at all, are crippled or destroyed. We see this illustrated by Ronald Nimkin, Jack Portnoy, and Heshie, whose sorties provide an enlightening counterpart to Alex’s full scale assault.

Ronald Nimkin is a sad case. “You couldn’t look for a boy more in love with his mother than Ronald!” (p. 97). The similarities with Alex are interesting: the boys appear to be close in age and live in the same building. Ronald is being groomed as a concert pianist; Alex had to “battle” his father’s wish that he study piano. (p. 26). Ronald does not fight back, however; instead he hangs himself from the shower head, a note pinned to his chest which reads: “Mrs. Blumenthal called. Please bring your mah-jongg rules to the game tonight. Ronald.” To Alex the moral is clear enough. “Now, how’s that for a good boy to the last drop? How’s that for a good boy, a thoughtful boy, a kind and courteous and well-behaved boy, a nice Jewish boy such as no one will ever have cause to be ashamed of?” (p. 120). One wonders. Surely Ronald would have been better off retreating to the bathroom and masturbating there instead of committing suicide. Isn’t it infinitely healthier for Alex, who sets up mah-jongg tiles for his mother (p. 15), to bite, kick, and scream than die a good boy’s death, hanged in a “roomy straitjacket, his nice stiffly laundered sports shirt” with only the slightest hint of criticism implied by the suicide implement—his father’s belt? Ronald, creature of his mother’s will, cannot even write a real suicide note, for he cannot face, no less protest, the causes of his suffocation. In this context, Alex’s mad behavior in the bathroom, even with his family’s dinner—the ill-fated liver—at least has some method to it.

Not surprisingly, Jack Portnoy’s problems also center on the bathroom. Unlike his son who seeks freedom in “diarrhea,” Jack is constipated, “his *kishkas* . . . gripped by the iron hand of outrage and frustration” (p. 5). The closest he can come to resisting the role of “good Jewish boy” occurs when he brings home Anne McCafferty. With her “terrific pair of legs” (p. 83) she foreshadows Heshie’s shiksa, “Legs” Dembosky. The lovely Anne, a fair-skinned creature with substantial breasts, is Jack’s revenge on Sophie for treating Alex as her lover. No wonder Anne gets fed chopped liver! In fact, we can never accurately assess the extent of Jack’s

¹Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 33. Subsequent page references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

²In *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) Roth writes: “I sometimes think of my generation of men as the first wave of determined D-day invaders, over whose bloody, wounded carcasses the flower children subsequently stepped ashore to advance triumphantly toward that libidinous Paris we had dreamed of liberating as we inched inland on our bellies, firing into the dark. “Daddy,” the youngsters ask, “what did you do in the war?” I humbly submit they could do worse than read *Portnoy's Complaint* to find out” (p. 8).

association with Anne, for while she is not the plain spinster in *shmittas* he claims it seems unlikely he is “slipping it to her” (p. 83). As Alex well knows, his father is not “‘King Kong’ Charlie Keller” (p. 11). He is just a kibbitzer at Sunday morning softball games, incapable of stealing the forbidden shikshas. There is no Monkey for him.

There is, however, for that true athlete-warrior—Heshie. His fate, presented in parodic terms which recall the emasculation of Samson, has the most serious implications for Alex. Heshie is the older cousin Alex idealizes. His father, Uncle Hymie, “the potent man in the family” (p. 51), is married to neurasthenic Aunt Clara. Because of his father’s model, and because his mother is medically unfit for active duty, Heshie reaches adolescence sexually intact. Unlike the other Jewish boys in Weequahic High, good musicians (like Ronald) who play in the school band during football games, Heshie excels on the field. Thigh muscles bulging, manly jockstrap in place, he stars in the javelin throw, an event “rich in symbolism” (p. 64). Best of all, he is engaged to a blond Polish shiksa whose specialty is making silver batons glide snakily between her legs.

Heshie’s engagement to Alice seems to fall somewhere between Jack bringing Anne home and Portnoy running off to Italy with the Monkey. As an act of rebellion it is too blatant for the Jewish community to condone, yet Heshie is not strong enough to go as far as Alex. When Rabbi Warshaw (who has bar mitzvahed Heshie and will bar mitzvah Alex) insists that he stop seeing Alice, Heshie pulls “at his own black hair” (p. 57) and, Samson-like, brings down the house about him. Alex monitoring this instructive interlude from his apartment beneath, waits and watches as the plaster falls.

When he learns of his betrayal, of Delilah Dembosky’s greed, Heshie retreats to the basement, rips off the cellar door and hurls “bottle after bottle of Squeeze from one dark end of the whitewashed cellar to the other” (p. 58). Like Ronald he is too good to wage total war; all he can do is hurl a javelin or displace his rage by throwing soda water against the cellar wall in one final attempt to break his father’s squeeze. The scene literally ends in a wrestling match with Uncle Hymie pinning his son.

Alex knows that his cousin, the third best javelin thrower in all New Jersey, “could easily have flipped my fifty-year-old uncle over onto his back, and pinned him to the cellar floor” (p. 64). What Heshie lacks is the commitment to full rebellion necessary to win this battle. Significantly, the last we hear of Heshie is that he has been “killed in the war” (p. 59).

The implications of the Nimkin/Heshie stories are not lost on Alex: “Momma! Poppa! . . . You simply cannot imagine how some people will respond to having served fifteen-and twenty-year sentences as some crazy bastard’s idea of ‘good’! So if I kicked you in the shins, Ma-má, if I sunk my teeth into your wrist clear through to the *bone*, count your blessings! For had I kept it *all* inside me, believe me, you too might have arrived home to find a pimply adolescent corpse swinging over the bathtub by his father’s belt” (p. 126). Alex realizes that Ronald and Heshie’s inability to express bottled up rage has suffocated them. Together, they exemplify the “smothered son in the Jewish joke!” (p. 111).

Heshie’s attempted rebellion does provide a paradigm for Alex, however, and Portnoy claims it as partly responsible for his break with his family. Rather than be “good,” suffer quietly and tear *his* hair, the unpleasant fact is that Alex becomes a smotherer of others. When he conquers the reluctant Sally Maulsby, the epitome of New England shikshadom, it is by forcing her to perform fellatio. Not surprisingly

the episode ends with the imaginary newspaper headline JEW SMOTHERS DEB WITH COCK (p. 240). Alex has learned that if survival means being the suffocator, the wrestler who does the pinning, so be it. Symbolically, the lesson of Heshie's surrender builds Alex's strength, and he attributes his ability to pin Naomi at novel's end to the fact that he worked out with Heshie's weights, an "inheritance" from his cousin.³

In truth, from the beginning Alex's compulsive masturbation has been nothing more than his way of countering Sophie's control. In the bathroom at home, on the bus to New Jersey, or in the Empire Burlesque house watching Thereal McCoy, his penis, like Heshie's javelin, is a sexual weapon, a "battered battering ram to freedom." Not surprisingly, his sexual experience as an adult remains essentially masturbatory. This is neatly suggested in his first heterosexual contact. After leafing through Ring Magazine in the kitchen while Smolka negotiates in the living room, a coin flip wins sixteen year old Alex the right to be jerked off by the mustachioed, one hundred and seventy pound Bubbles Girardi. When the desired result does not occur on the count of fifty, Alex must finish the act himself, as he has all his life.

It is a short step from this to sex with Sally Maulsby. Instead of reading Ring Magazine, Alex's encounter with Sally becomes the main event, preceded by an imaginary ring announcer who introduces the antagonists, Alex "*in the black pubic hair, ladies and gentlemen, weighing one hundred and seventy pounds, at least half of which is still undigested halvah and hot pastrami,*" taking on The Pilgrim, "*his opponent, in the fair fuzz*" (p. 234). For three months Alex and Sally have wrestled over the question of fellatio; Alex's imprecations have been met by uncharacteristically stiff resistance. Watching a clarinet quintet perform finally brings Sally around. A more sophisticated struggle than with Bubbles, perhaps, but once again ending unsatisfactorily, this time at the "count of sixty" (p. 239).

The logical last step in this progression is the Monkey, a woman who needs no prodding to perform fellatio, anytime, anywhere (p. 201). In sex with this street pick-up Portnoy finds the fullest expression of his masturbatory rebellion. Mary Jane Reed, however, turns out to be Alex's last stand, his final attempt to "be bad—and to enjoy it" (p. 124), for visiting Israel produces a sea change. His impotence after wrestling with Naomi so disturbs Alex that he visits Spielvogel; here, for the first time, he acknowledges the self-destructive effects of sex divorced from love. Indeed, his monologue suggests that he has come to view sexual warfare as a form of neurosis, himself "one of the fragmented multitude" (p. 186), a slave to pathological drives.⁴ I believe Alex's novel-ending scream is not a lament of surrender like Heshie's, but truly cathartic, an attempt to exorcise the spirit of "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met." If so, then Spielvogel's punchline is not the ironic jab it has often been taken to be,⁵ but rather a genuine harbinger of peace for the suffocated son in the Jewish joke.

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³For a radically different explanation of Heshie's rebellion, see Bruno Bettelheim, "Portnoy Psychoanalyzed," *Midstream* (June/July 1969), p. 16.

⁴For another view see Steven David Lavine, "The Degradations of Erotic Life: *Portnoy's Complaint* Reconsidered," *Michigan Academician*, 11, pp. 357-62.

⁵Most critics feel otherwise. Bernard F. Rogers, Jr. in *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne, 1978) writes: "This perennial effort to free the hero and his consciousness from social strictures of heredity and environment is, of course, inevitably an unsuccessful one" (p. 89). For Rogers, Portnoy's attempt at liberation fails: "Dr. Spielvogel must have the last word—a punch line promising that reality will now have its day" (p. 90).