

# OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

*Maurice Wohlgelernter*

## MAMA AND PAPA AND ALL THE COMPLAINTS

Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no *Mutter*, to call her *Mutter* makes her a little comic . . . *Mutter* is particularly German to the Jew . . . the Jewish woman who is called "Mother" therefore becomes not only comic but strange. "Mama" would be a better name if only one didn't imagine *Mutter* behind it. I believe that it is only the memories of the Ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word *Vater* too is far from meaning the Jewish father.

Kafka, *The Diaries, 1910-1913*

That motherhood, like flag and country, has always been a hallowed institution is obvious. In America, which is in considerable degree matriarchal, this is especially true. Nothing, seemingly, evokes greater adoration than the American mother who, among other tributes, is granted "a day" each year for a national display of filial love. She is forever admired, forever adored, forever exalted.

True of America, it is even truer of Jewish tradition. From the Biblical matriarchs to the Macabbean mother of the seven martyred sons to the sorrowing mothers of the millions mercilessly slain in our own day, the function of the Jewish mother transcended the immediate range of bearing, preserving, and educating her own children and

assumed the millennial role of protecting the whole people and ennobling the nation. Thus, she represented not only the link between, say, faith and maternity, or between motherhood and the Sabbath but also between "Mothers of the Beginning" and the modern heroic "Mothers in Israel." Little wonder, therefore, that the family service every Sabbath eve includes the recital of Solomon's alphabetical glorification of the "Woman of Valor," culminating in the most tender tribute ever offered to mothers in a single sentence: "Her children rise up and call her blessed."

But time, circumstance, and some radical new orientations in American Jewish life have, apparently, changed all that. The Jewish mother, in the main, is not the

## Of Books, Men and Ideas

same. Her children rise up but no longer call her blessed. She is possessive and smothers her children with protective love, demanding in return, gobs of love and gratitude. She is ambitious for sons and inordinately proud of them when they succeed. Enormously successful, some sons find her obsessive and one of them, obsessed, cries out, while recalling his childhood on a reclining psychiatrist's couch: "how can she rise with me on the crest of my genius during those dusky beautiful hours after school and then at night, because I will not eat some string beans and a baked potato, point a bread knife at my heart?" The Jewish mother is now the butt of derisive laughter. What has happened, apparently, is that the American matriarchic tradition was combined with the traditions of Jewish family life to produce the American Jewish-mother joke.

And the jokes run wild. There is hardly a stand-up or sit-down comic, whether on television or radio, in Las Vegas or the "borscht-belt" who does not proliferate the Jewish-mother joke. One such, for example, is the advice to a mother on what to give her son on his birthday—two ties, so that when he appears wearing one of them she can say: "what's the matter: don't you *like* the other tie I gave you?" Every vaudeville routine is certain to include these endless, tasteless and, at times, "humorless" jokes in almost every act. Most of them, when viewed critically seem to imply that the love of the Jew-

ish mother is, ultimately, destructive. But that, alas, is no joke.

And along comes Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint*\* with the most explosive joke of all. At times brilliant, at other times indecent, at still other times boring, but, at all times, in good "clean" prose, this book has succeeded, mainly because of the advanced publicity in every leading newspaper, journal and mass media picture magazine in the country and abroad, to become the conversation piece of the year. It is the main topic of discussion at every wedding party, bar-mitzvah, social club, women's club and, most decidedly, every Sisterhood meeting and closing luncheon. Over half a million copies are presently in print and the author, wallowing in all the national and international publicity, is gleefully watching his cash register tally "a take" of more than a million dollars.

The critical reception, despite the colossal financial success of the book, has been varied and uneven. The majority of critics have been lavish in their praise, calling this novel, among other things, "an American masterwork," "pure gold," "a dazzling performance," "the most brilliant and the funniest novels of our time," "a bullseye hit." Other critics — few in number, to be sure — taking a more sober look at the bull's eye, have said that Roth's latest book "succeeds brilliantly in generating revulsion," and must be faulted further for the "superficiality of [its] treatment" of what some seem to

---

\* *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth (New York: Random House, 1969).

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

think is the newest and best portrait of the artist as a young Jew. The severest critics, of course, have been the Jewish pulpiteers — the Christian clergy have, on the whole, been discreetly silent — condemning Roth and Portnoy as, at best, “purveyors of pornography,” devils incarnate who are attempting to corrupt the young and old and, at worst, destroyers of the image of the Jew, his family and his faith in the eyes of his “neighbors.”

To judicate, therefore, between these disparate views is difficult not only because there may be some merit to both but rather because such is not the function of the critic, any critic. To engage in the raging battle of this book, to acclaim passionately on the one hand, or, on the other, to condemn mercilessly, would not be, surely, in the best interests of criticism. For what constitutes “poetic faith,” to use Coleridge’s felicitous phrase — one of the best-known tags, incidentally, of literary criticism — is “the willing suspension of disbelief.” It is the essence of literature, one needs recall, “to make a willing suspension of disbelief in the selfhood of someone else,” especially in this instance when, in a running comment on the literary issues raised by the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth tells us emphatically that “in his writing lifetime, the use of obscenity has by and large been governed by one’s literary taste and tact and not by the mores of the audience,” which only confirms what has long ago been apparent that in almost every developed society, “literature is able to conceive of the self and

selfhood of others” far more intensely than the general culture ever can. And it is, therefore, this conception of the self and selfhood that alone should move one to consider *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The results of such consideration may, nevertheless, prove highly negative.

### II

But, first, the story. It is told in the first person by one Alexander Portnoy who, at thirty-three years of age, feels compelled to reveal to his psychiatrist Dr. Spielvogel how his loving, protective, possessive Jewish mother destroyed his capacity to live and love in any satisfactory way. Simple in outline, it is far less simple in meaning. For Roth, in the person of his hero has attempted, in an unremittingly hilarious and hysterical howl of excrementitious anguish, to tell what’s killing him.

Before divulging his specific “hang-ups,” however, Roth prints a mock-dictionary definition of his hero’s affliction. This is published immediately after the frontispiece to serve, one supposes, as a kind of general introduction to the entire book. It reads:

Portnoy’s Complaint (pôrt’ -noiz kam-plānt’) n. [after Alexander Portnoy (1933- )].] A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature. Spielvogel says: ‘Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, autoeroticism and oral coitus are plentiful; as a consequence of the patient’s “morality,” however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in

## Of Books, Men and Ideas

overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration.' . . . It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship.

What Roth wishes to convey, and not without a sense of gleeful satisfaction, is, first, that the year 1933, besides somehow indicating Portnoy's birth and age 33, is also the year, let us recall, when Judge John M. Woolsey issued his momentous decision permitting the printing and copyright of Joyce's *Ulysses*. To be sure, one cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, compare the work at hand with that classic of modern literature. Yet, it dare not escape our attention, as it presumably did not Roth's, what the Judge, among other things, said then: "In many places it seems to me disgusting, but although it contains, as I have mentioned above, many words usually considered dirty, I have not found anything that I consider to be dirt for dirt's sake." That year, therefore, gave birth to freedom of expression without which all art and writing, including *Portnoy's Complaint*, would have been impossible.

But, possibly, of equal, if not greater, significance than this mock definition might be the author's understanding, though never, as we shall see, fully developed, that it is of the essence of both literature and psychoanalysis to present the opposition between two principles, those that Freud called the "reality principle" and the "pleasure principle." That there is in literature a continuity between pleasure and

reality is certain, witness, for example, the poetry of the Romantics, say, Wordsworth and Keats, and, the greatest of the moderns, Yeats. The latter's famous sentence "In dreams begin responsibility" is nothing more than an affirmation that he bases the moral life on the autonomy of the youthful hedonistic phantasies.

And, in the earlier and even more famous equations of Keats "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," the poet is similarly clarifying the essence of art. The first equation, as Mr. Trilling has correctly noted, is saying that "the pleasure principle is at the root of existence, and of knowledge, and of the moral life;" while, in the second, Keats is putting in two words his enormously complex belief that "the self can so develop that it may, in the intensity of art or mediation, perceive even very painful facts with a kind of pleasure."

Little wonder, therefore, that, reclining on the psychiatrist's couch, Roth recalls the painful facts of his life — his mother, his father, his gorgeous libido — with a pleasure, apparently, that borders on ecstasy. "Look at me," this smart kid from Newark — 'the *bonditt* who doesn't even have to open a book — A in everything. Albert Einstein the Second' — seems to be saying; "look and see how I go to the pleasures of the id, the pleasures of the ego, and, sometimes, the pleasures of the supero-ego to reveal 'my modern museum of gripes and grievances.'" But that museum, unlike others, is accessible, alas, only in the toilets of his mind.

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

What Portnoy flushes out of his museum is not only the pleasures but his complaints, or diseases of the body and mind. Beginning with his childhood impressions, he recalls those complaints which, unchanged, remained suppressed in his unconscious until they were verbalized in all their sordidness to his "shrink" and his eavesdropping readers. One of them, of course, is his father. That little old man, "kindly, anxious, uncomprehending," appeared forever crushed by the colossus known as the insurance company for which he worked as a salesman. Unable to pierce the armor or slay the "Waspish" Goliath that ground him to nothingness and ineffectuality, his father failed not only as a man and as a husband similarly crushed by an "effective" wife but also, alas, as a father. In a word, Roth's word, he was forever "constipated." So much so, in fact, that that alone seemed his chief preoccupation. Roth describes his malady:

He drank — of course, not whiskey like a *goy*, but mineral oil and milk of magnesia; and chewed on Ex-Lax; and ate All-Bran morning and night; and downed mixed dried fruits by the pound bag. He suffered — did he suffer! — from constipation . . . He used to brew dried senna leaves in a saucepan, and that . . . comprised his witchcraft; brewing those veiny green leaves, stirring with a spoon the evil-smelling liquid, then carefully pouring it into a strainer, and hence into his blockaded body, through that weary and afflicted expression on his face. But all catharses were in vain for that man: his *kishkas* were gripped by the iron hand of outrage and frustration . . .

Thus, his father's constipation became at once real and symbolic.

But this physical ailment, it might be further noted, is not the only thing that irked young Alexander; he also complains about the old man's ignorance. In a passage which, incidentally, curiously escaped the attention of all the reviewers, Portnoy refers to his father as a "moron" for reading *Collier's Hygeia* and *Look* but for failing, of all things, to appreciate *Partisan Review*. What is so terribly disturbing is not so much the bitter derision but the gratuitous intellectual snobbery. That a hard-working insurance salesman would or could not appreciate this "little mag" — the Bible of the "Jewish Mafia" — is no cause for such diabolical condemnation. To refer to his father as a "Philistine" for being unable, because untutored in the groves of academe, to genuflect before, say, Susan Sontag, the current arbitress of manners, morals, and literary taste, is to be unforgivably insulting. And that, even more than the constant and at times, excessive and boring use of Anglo-Saxon four letter words, irritates and disgusts even an insensitive reader. A father, however constipated, may not move in literary circles but that does not classify him as a "schm——," or worse.

For Portnoy, there *is*, apparently something worse — his ubiquitous mother Sophie, née Ginsky, who, as much, or more than his father, was the outstanding producer and packager of fear and guilt. Because she could "accomplish anything" with her overpowering, overbearing nature, she

## Of Books, Men and Ideas

forced Alex to race screaming from her clutches into all sorts of places and objects to do "his little thing." Listen as he recalls, with shrieking laughter, her performance during the polio season:

She should have gotten medals from the March of Dimes! Open your mouth. Why is your throat red? Do you have a headache you're not telling me about? You're not going to any baseball game, Alex, until I see you move your neck. Is your neck stiff? Then why are you moving it that way? You ate like you were nauseous, are you nauseous? Well, you ate like you were nauseous. I don't want you drinking from the drinking fountain in that playground. If you're thirsty wait until you're home. Your throat is sore, isn't it. I can tell how you're swallowing. I think maybe what you are going to do, Mr. Joe DiMaggio, is put that glove away and lie down. I am not going to allow you to go outside in this heat and run around, not with that sore throat, I'm not. I want to take your temperature. I don't like the sound of this throat business one bit. To be very frank, I am actually beside myself that you have been walking around all day with a sore throat and not telling your mother. Why did you keep this a secret? Alex, polio doesn't know from baseball games. It only knows from iron lungs and crippled forever! I don't want you running around and that's final. Or eating hamburgers out. Or mayonnaise. Or chopped liver. Or tuna. Not everybody is careful the way your mother is about spoilage. You're used to a spotless house, you don't begin to know what goes on in restaurants. Do you know why your mother when we go to the Chink's will never sit facing the kitchen? Because I don't want to see what goes on back there. Alex, you must wash everything, is that clear? Everything! . . .

Small wonder, therefore, that poor Alex felt himself morbid and weak. Repressed, he shakes with fear and begins to wonder whether these persecutions are similar to those suffered by world Jewry for two millennia. He can find little rest and no peace. Forever dejected, he harbors feelings of hate and disgust at such performances by his Jewish mother who lives only to frighten, to cajole, to suppress, and to castigate him. Unable to withstand this constant pressure, Alex, like her anxious and frustrated, considers himself "crippled." Lame and scared, he believes the early years of his childhood were spent in a "lunatic asylum" with his sister Hannah the "only person whom he could talk to." (Shades of Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye!*). Hence, overcome with revulsion for a mother who made life miserable, he cries hysterically to his analyst: "I'm living in the middle of a Jewish joke! . . . *only it ain't no joke . . . make me whole!*"

That such unwholesome mothers are plentiful in real life is beyond question. They are found everywhere: on the lower and upper East side, in Newark, and, in even greater numbers, in Scarsdale. They spread their fluttering wings everywhere, hovering lovingly and unlovingly over a vast array of discontented children who, exceedingly conscious of the widening "generation gap," find the "couch" the last refuge of the inhibited mind. And when these children finally free themselves, if ever, their mothers, the overreachers, spread their wings even further and invade Tem-

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

ple governing boards, social and political clubs and, of course, sisterhoods, “vying with twenty other Jewish women to be the patron saint(s) of self-sacrifice.”

And yet, what is questionable, despite a genuine willingness “to suspend disbelief,” is the thought that Sophie Portnoy might not possibly be considered by many readers as no more than a stereotype of the Jewish mother. They might think her real. And there lies one of the saddest aspects of Roth’s joke which, though admittedly funny, will gradually become stale and, even worse, be forgotten. For there is surely more to a Jewish mother than is given us here. A cursory glance at her life from Biblical times to our own, would easily reveal that her significance far exceeds, of all things, a joke. Her selfless contribution to the welfare of her family and people has long ago been recorded in the blood and ink of history. There is, we know, a more authentic view of the Jewish mother readily available in a multitude of sources, ancient and modern.

Because the sources are many, choosing one becomes difficult. One could actually begin anywhere. But, for reasons which, we trust, will at once be obvious, we turn not to the ancients or the moderns but to a contemporary writer — Mr. Alfred Kazin — one of America’s most distinguished and genuinely perceptive critics. A member, like Roth, of that same group of intellectuals who, ever since the second World War, have dominated the American literary scene — earning themselves the dubious dis-

inction of being called by some the “Jewish Mafia” — Mr. Kazin, in the *New York Review of Books*, was lavish in his praise of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, referring to it, among other things, as “a touching as well as hilariously lewd work.” This, of course, should not surprise us. Anything published by this “group” always receives — often from one another — immediate recognition and always, even if not approved, a healthy measure of respect. Besides, Mr. Kazin also grew up in a ghetto — Brownsville — which, if not as gilded as Roth’s Newark, was plagued by some of the same conditions. And both, of course, had Jewish mothers.

But here, to be sure, all similarity ends. For, when Mr. Kazin, academically established and heralded, came to record the trials of his youth in that most memorable autobiography *A Walker in the City*, he portrays an altogether different picture of his mother than the one he praises in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. If decidedly not “hilariously lewd,” his portrait is certainly more touching and, one suspects, will be more lasting than Roth’s. Reading Mr. Kazin’s description of his mother, one cannot help but recognize, at once, that, despite all complaints, he displays a sympathy and understanding of “home” and “mother” that Roth, either because of temperament, or upbringing, or both, cannot now or ever appreciate and record. It begins with the memory of what once was the center of home — the kitchen:

The kitchen gave a special character to our lives; my mother’s char-

## Of Books, Men and Ideas

acter. All my memories of that kitchen are dominated by the nearness of my mother sitting all day long at her sewing machine, by the clocking of the treadle against the linoleum floor, by the patient twist of her right shoulder as she automatically pushed at the wheel with one hand or lifted the foot to free the needle where it had got stuck in a thick piece of material. The kitchen was her life. Year by year, as I began to take in her fantastic capacity for labor and her anxious zeal, I realized it was ourselves she stitched together . . .

And much later, apparently, when Mr. Kazin was long past being gushingly sentimental, when he was writing of Blake and Dylan Thomas, of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Erich Heller and Edmund Wilson, and a host of other poets, novelists, and critics, he returns astonishingly to the pervasive truth that more than kinship bound him to his hard working mother. It is more than respect or honor or admiration or virtue; it is that something which, of late, has come sadly — nay, tragically — to mean the bizarre, the odd, the weird, but once was, in its purest form, the essence of all parent-child, mother-son relationships; it is, in short, love. Mr. Kazin tells it best:

. . . All day long in the kitchen my mother and I loved each other in measures of tribulation well-worn as the *Kol Nidre*. We looked to each other for support; we recognized each other with a mutual sympathy and irritation; each of us bore some part of the other like a guarantee that the other would never die. I stammered, she used to say, because she stammered; when she was happy, the air on the block tasted new. I could never really take it in that

there had been a time, even in *der heym*, when she had been simply a woman alone, with a life in which I had no part.

Of course, to expect Roth to write this way would be, to say the least, unfair. To demand that would be as ludicrous as asking why, say, Wilfrid Owen is no John Milton. No two men, let alone writers, are, or can ever be, or write, the same. But what we may justifiably ask is what in these two works might offer, at least, a clue to their condition as sons? What in the recollection of their past gives some meaning of their present or, better still, of their Jewish attitudes? Of the many revelations that distinguish them, there is one passage in *A Walker in the City* that, more than any other, offers, perhaps, as much an explanation of Mr. Kazin's attitude to his mother as it does of Roth's. It reveals, apparently, why the former writes so understandingly, so movingly of his home experiences, while the latter is so bitter, so harsh, so intolerable, and forever singing his "Jewish blues."

To be sure, the custom discussed in this passage is not, within the general context of Jewish religious law, of major significance. It deals with the lighting of a memorial, or *yahrzeit*, candle each year on the anniversary of a parent's or other family member's death. But, however minimal an act, its effect should never be minimized. Sometimes, that is the sole remnant of a giant tradition still functioning in many a Jewish home. And, although Mr. Kazin also noticed that his mother's sewing machine "whir-



## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

red down a little only on Saturdays and holy days," what did have an overpowering effect on him were, however, just these very candles lit each year. It added greatly to his adoration of his mother. He tells us as much:

Twice a year, on the anniversaries of her parents' deaths, my mother placed on top of the ice-box an ordinary kitchen glass packed with wax, the *Yortsayt*, and lit the candle in it. Sitting at the kitchen table over my homework, I would look across the threshold to that mourning glass, and sense that for my mother the distance from our kitchen to *der haym*, from life to death, was only a flame's length away. Poor as we were, it was not poverty that drove my mother so hard; it was loneliness—some endless bitter brooding over all those left behind, dead or dying or soon to die; a loneliness locked up in her kitchen that dwelt every day on the hazards of life and the nearness of death, but still kept struggling in the lock, trying to get us through by endless labor.

As a result, he, too, felt himself forever burning — to live, to get through, to make good — with a candle lighting his way.

No less than Mr. Kazin, Roth, too, was eager to get through, to make good, even if, at first, it was Sophie who pressured him incessantly to do so. But, in his meteoric rise, he, like countless others, left everything Jewish behind, if, indeed, there was ever anything left to leave behind. The flame that guided him came from a gilded chandelier, not the flickering flame of a candle, real or symbolic. No wonder, then, that, already successful beyond anything he ever in his wildest imagination anticipated,

Roth should, amid all his ranting and raving, beg the psychiatrist to make him "whole again."

### III

What was fragmented for Portnoy was not only his strange relationship with his possessive mother but also, because of her, his views of religion. His case of "arrested development" applied to his "oedipal drives" as well as to his knowledge and appreciation of classic Judaism. That this knowledge is pathetically limited is obvious; it indicates, at best, no more than a minimal Jewish education, if even that, and, at worst, a woeful distortion of the truth.

Equating all religion with his parents, he is determined to act the Freudian hero, "a man who stands up manfully against his father and in the end victoriously overcomes him." Governed, he confesses, by the "pleasure principle" in which his entire psychical activity is bent upon procuring pleasure and avoiding pain, Portnoy demands that we "put the Id back in Yid" and thus "liberate this nice Jewish boy's libido." Hence, laws, customs, rituals become, for him, symbols of deepest oppression which he must reject totally. Or, as he shouts at his mother: "Where did you get the idea that the most wonderful thing I could be in life was obedient?"

Of all the rules, Portnoy singles out the Jewish dietary laws — all others, apparently he discards with utter abandon — for disobedience, derision, and disdain. These, like his mother, he finds most oppressive:

## Of Books, Men and Ideas

What else, I ask you, were all these prohibitive dietary rules and regulations all about to begin with, what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed? Practice, darling, practice, practice, practice. 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. Why else the two sets of dishes? Why else the kosher soap and salt? Why else, I ask you, but to remind us three times a day, that life is boundaries and restrictions if its anything, hundreds of thousands of little rules laid down by none other than None Other, rules which you obey without question, regardless of how idiotic they may appear (and thus remain, by obeying, in His good graces), or you transgress . . . only with the strong likelihood (my father assures me) that come next Yom Kippur and the names are written in the big book where He writes the names of those who are going to get to live until the following September . . . and lo, your own precious name ain't among them . . . And it doesn't make any difference either . . . how big or how small the rule is that you break . . . it's the simple fact of waywardness, and that alone, that He absolutely cannot stand, and which He does not forget either, when He sits angrily down . . . and begins to leave the names out of that book.

Such comments, because they totally miss the mark, as any review of the Maimonidean *Book of Holiness* will immediately indicate, gives the reader, to use Portnoy's phrase, a "smashing, miserable headache." And not only because he seem to be echoing the tired

old Freudian cliché of God being a father substitute and thus, in Roth's scheme of themes, the proper subject for ridicule and sick humor. One would expect, even in so long a sick mama-papa joke, less of such rabble, babble.

But, then again, perhaps not! Why expect more? After all, Roth has already revealed his understanding of Judaism long before the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*. This revelation helps explain, somewhat, the negative views of Jews and Judaism that pervade his work. What is surprising, of course, is that none of the critics — those few, that is, who were, in print, profoundly irritated by some of his rabble — seemed to recall the views he saw fit to print. It bears consideration.

In the spring of 1961, *Commentary* printed a symposium — one of its periodic features supposedly aimed at giving its readers a giant smorgasbord of differing opinions to nibble at leisurely, with enough fare to satisfy any and all tastes — entitled "Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals." It brought together under one tent "a random group of the most talented and most articulate younger intellectuals of Jewish *birth* (italics mine. M.W.) in America" to display their candid answers to a series of specific questions posed by the editor. (Incidentally, the more recent one on the "State of Jewish Belief" published some three years ago contained, surprisingly, the views of Jews not only by *birth* but of conviction and commitment). Roth, of course, was among the invited. Of the six major questions posed,