

Portnoyan Theology, or A New Inquiry Into the Human Prospect

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I like licentious literature and hate Savonarolas. Voyages through the mysteries of the organism are not devoid of interest. We have long since become used to exploring the endless mysteries of the universe. We should now explore the wonderful potential of the body. Every body has its own biofeedback, and if probing into these hidden recesses is healing, so much the better.

But the exploitation of passing fads and lasting causes is quite another matter. Consider, for example, the recent imitation of *Portnoy's Complaint* entitled "Speaking From the Body" by Union Theological Seminary Professor Tom F. Driver (in *Theology and Body*, edited by John Fenton and published by Westminster in 1974). Every writer is free to favor a particular and individual form of literary expression. It is not with the style of Professor Driver's essay that I take issue, but the misrepresentation of Christian theology, radicalism, and, probably, of the body itself.

In his novel Philip Roth used scatological prose for an often hilarious tour de force on a distasteful subject. The author of "Speaking From the Body" presents his work as "being on the topic of theology," and introduces it within a collection of theological papers. "Speaking From the Body" was not written in a trance, as a "poetic meditation." On the contrary, it carefully describes experiences and, after reflection and some argument, draws definite theological conclusions about the Christian faith and the meaning of human life. It is a *demonstration*, virtually a *manifesto*.

There is a striking similarity between the original Portnoy and the author of "Speaking From the Body." Both are advertising their breakdown, their clamorous,

infantile id, and a vigilant, righteous superego. Both excel in acts of exhibitionism, fetishism, autoerotism. Both cash in on the apparent boldness of their confessions, undisturbed by matters of style or taste. But while Portnoy's complaint was mainly a document about repression and, *ipso facto*, change, Portnoyan theology is talk about pseudorepression and, *ipso facto*, exploitation of change. Recklessly manipulating what was once called Consciousness III, it is the most extreme form of "with-it" theology—a caricature of liberation, an immense scatological diversion. Exploiting valid objections against Old-Time Religion, it escalates them to the point of incomprehensibility; objections become negations, and negations become liquidations.

Take the theological view on the body. It used to be a set of admonitions or rules concerning the proper use of the body in several of its functions. With the coming of modernity this approach seemed obsolete for the most part. Under the pressure of scientific and cultural change, the ultimate relevancy of bodily well-being, as opposed to the absolute valuing of the immortal soul, gained ground, helped along by a worldview that was mainly secular. Soon this change of perspective—mainly on sex—gave rise to a totally nihilistic attitude toward theology. "Non-bodily theologies," we read, "are anti-self, anti-neighbour, anti-society, and anti-world." "The human being *is* his body. My body is constitutive of my very creatureliness. I do not have to be something else in addition to my body to be good, to be acceptable." Taking the proposition farther, let's get rid of spirituality altogether. "Soul, spirit, God and theology are the questions, not the starting points. For a bodily theology soul, spirit, God, and theology must be understood as functions of our bodies, not the other way around."

The reader who takes this as a proclamation of materialism is mistaken. From Epicurus and Lucretius, to Marx and Lenin, the mere "function of the body"

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was given due respect, status, and valor. What is it that the theologian wants to prove? That Christianity is bankrupt? That we have to accept a radical materialism opposed to all readings of Christian doctrine? Not at all. Professor Driver assures us that his proposal is Christianity in its "oldest" and "newest" interpretation. "To make this affirmation is, as I understand it, not to be anti-Christian at all. It is to re-express the ancient Christian heritage, especially its Old Testament and Jewish tradition as we can understand it in our present time." From which premise he proceeds to the wholesale liquidation of the mind, soul, spirit, objective truth, reason, and the ideal.

For the purposes of his confession, the author requires an ontological base that suggests a typological "Friar Portnoy."

In order to justify the worship of the body and the cult of anger, he is obliged to perform a double sleight-of-hand. First, he must blur the mind-body distinction to the point of completely excluding the mind. Second, he must free the new fetishism from culpability by getting rid of the notions of sin, both personal and original.

The first objective is achieved by means of elaborate bathtub ceremonies in which he replaces the rituals and symbols of Christianity with in-depth examinations of his infinitely intriguing body. In the course of this peculiar meditation, he discovers (extraordinarily) that the mind is not autonomous from the body. The real sanctuary of the mind lies in the soft parts of the body, especially the "back of our thighs." This looks like the most patent brand of localizationism (the doctrine that localizes powers, spirit, energy, and nervous functions in privileged zones of the body in a vain attempt at surpassing dualism). For example, our theologian feels "alienated in his upper legs" and "reborn in the soft, fleshy, feminine, obscure underside." He thinks he can locate the source of "voice production in the region of the pubic bone." Thus, by successive bathtub revelations life comes to be complete. If this is not medieval anatomical localism, then Descartes himself might be called a modern Gestaltist. In his naiveté, Descartes chose the pineal gland as the locus of encounter between mind and body, the thinking and the extended substances. Our more sophisticated theologian prefers to focus on the behind.

The greatest evil wrought by religion, according to Friar Portnoy, is that it kept man in the dark about the decisive role played by *these* parts of the body. It is important to add that the body Portnoy has in view (in mind?) is never *le corps propre* of the philosopher (not "one's own body"), but *his* body. Thus his doctrine is not only localistic but emphatically ego-centered localism.

Although focusing on self-contemplation, there is occasional talk about love and I-Thou relationship (along with a profusion of I-Thigh). But in fact any

remnants of Buberian dialogue are excluded. Other people, notably women, are not allowed to enter this experience except as admirers, partaking of, or sympathizing with, the adoration of Friar Portnoy's things, foot arches, and various other parts, the crucial importance of which is gradually revealed.

Friar Portnoy's confession is not intended as an act of personal therapy. It is rather presented as a major breakthrough in theology. The attack against spirituality invokes the names of Tillich and Niebuhr, Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty. They provide the shield of authority behind which the bathtub confession fights for acceptance as philosophical theology. Even if we were to consider the essay a mere autobiographical sketch, an operation of personal taboo-shedding, there would still remain disturbing distortions of concepts. Friar Portnoy's actual performance is the wholesale replacement of theology with Gestalt therapy. What he offers as autobiographical poetry is a reproduction of a chapter on "Retroflection" from a popular booklet on Gestalt therapy by Dr. Frederick Perls of Esalen Institute fame.

According to the spirit of Gestalt therapy, our theologian is reexperiencing the past-in-the-present. Thus he places his first childhood experience of revelation in a church on what we may call (again, in Gestalt terminology) the "hot seat of personal responsibility." He recalls that "to hit and sustain a high note while singing hymns it helped if he relaxed his anus." What troubled him in his "lingering childhood impression" was that people singing hymns in church "had no business having anuses." However, "he comforted himself with remembrance of Martin Luther's scatological mind, and wondered what Luther thought about in church." (If this discovery is doubtful as "revelation," it is equally doubtful as Gestalt recall. Unless, of course, at that early age the prodigious Friar Portnoy was already knowledgeable about Luther's "scatological mind.") Reflection, as is only fitting, leads to possibilities in *praxis*: "What if the minister should invite the congregation to open their anuses and sing?" And so it goes.

Friar Portnoy identifies interiority with muscles and organs: "He turned his attention *inward*. Tired limbs and untuned muscles spoke to him: 'Wash us,' they said. There was a chorus of complaint in his body. 'Take care of me.'" After the long slumber into which theology and spirituality had plunged him, he feels resurrected to real life by the incredible discovery of his body: "To all this care his body responded. He could feel *life* stirring within himself." From this point on he would constantly oppose to the deathlike spirituality of the Christ the shining masculinity of his organs. His reading of the Bible results in a new gospel according to his body: "The fate of the self is the fate of the body, and the gospel is body-gospel, but none of his

[theological] teachers had said so."

Nor does Friar Portnoy lack a theory of knowledge. Corporeal sensation is the one thing he believes in. Symbolic language or abstract thought have no place in his system. "He was a man, quite literally, who had not known how he lifted himself. He resisted following up the symbolism....It was more important to notice the muscles doing their job." His God is immanent in the extreme. He approvingly quotes a friend: "There are earth-mothers and sky-fathers. We need some earth-fathers." It is clear that the earth-fathers of his imagination have nothing to do with the immediacy of the sacred. They are, more likely, male aids in bathtub revelation, for Portnoy does not get enmeshed in symbols when he speaks of earth-fathers. By Jupiter, he means Earth Fathers!

Ill-digested Gestaltism is evident in Portnoy's theory of anger-repression by Christianity. Anger is the main provider of energy and, in his view, Christianity is repeatedly guilty of having repressed it.

When Fritz Perls wrote his first account of the new therapy, *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, he was keenly aware that he had to avoid the old-fashioned anatomical localization. That is why—justifiably or not—he named his therapy Gestalt, meaning that the whole configuration was more than the sum of the parts. A "ruthless healer," as he was described, Perls had warned against narcissistic tendencies and the infantile games of anger. Whatever may have happened to his other Esalen disciples, Friar Portnoy exhibits a powerful fixation on anatomical localization. When he was angry, *en famille*, his energy would rise to the top of his body. But more often than not he would be immersed in the contemplation of the "back side of his thighs," around which endless considerations are woven; not of course to the neglect of the possibilities suggested by his legs. One morning, for instance, after he had beaten his therapist with a bat made of foam rubber (the therapist had arrived a little late), the naughty boy could not feel one bit of remorse; remorse smacks of "Christian alienation." On the contrary, he was worried that "he didn't feel the anger in his legs."

The author of all this is a perceptive critic of drama. More the wonder that he does not recognize himself playing either an executioner-in-chief for those surrounding him or, in the intervals, a pampered child. The purpose here is not to psychoanalyze a particular personality. One is struck, however, by the immediacy of Portnoyan theology, its direct impact on persons, which it shares with so many trends in today's "culture of anger." Portnoy fuses a mystic, romantic feeling of sorts with the revelation of a sudden need for physical violence. "Everyone was pleasant, the day fine, the mountain one he had long wanted to explore and not particularly difficult." In this bucolic atmosphere Friar Portnoy suddenly becomes "almost beside himself with anger." The romantic feeling for nature evolves into the pretext for a *profession of anger*, the

explanation of which lies in the underutilization of the muscles at the rear of his body. Just prior to this discovery he seeks, under the most benign of circumstances, to vent his anger on an innocent company; he looks for someone to kick, and, not being offered the slightest opportunity to do so, he resolves never to climb a mountain again. All this may be psychologically interesting. But is it theologically sound?

Portnoy's treatment of anger acknowledges that something is wrong within: anger signals pain. But his theory denies any value to signs or symbolisms of evil. Anger is a precious reservoir that has at all costs to be kept intact. "The more he treated it like an affliction or a visitation of some evil spirit, the worse it got." Pages are full with mourning for the anger that was never vented. Juvenile delinquents are presumably to be encouraged to unleash their anger. We should not inhibit them in emulating the angry adult when therapy—and now bodily theology—are telling them to enjoy anger as beautiful muscular sensation.

The person, we are told, is the field of a constant body-mind war, of an internal war between legs, muscles, and so forth, a war which must be externalized somehow. As a result, innocents are constantly being used as targets for "therapeutic discharge"; friends, wife, sisters coexist with the subject only in their roles as victims, sex objects, or auxiliaries of narcissistic practices. They are presumably good at meditating on the hero's soft parts, as witnesses for his scopophilia (voyeurism). Portnoy's wife allegedly told him one day, in "her maddeningly feminine way, that it was a shame, since he spent so much energy on these scenes, that he did not enjoy them more."

The blatant male chauvinism is not the only sin of this essay. Still more dangerous, it seems to me, are his attacks against the Christian way of treating anger, hostility, and other negative feelings. That way is represented by his mother's principles of education. Her constant "therapy," in accordance with the Christian ethic, was to try and free his mind from childish egocentricity, from self-admiring fury. This compassionate interference Portnoy resented as a child, and still resents as an adult theologian. He resented his mother's trying to stop a vicious fight he started with his brother. The child reacted strongly to this inhibiting intervention, and angrily proclaimed the escalation of childlike jealousy to mutual hate. "I hate him and he hates me too."

The rationale of anger is hate. At that moment motherly therapy does not crush the child with punishment, not even remonstrance, but proceeds with the Christian act of *denial*, dismissing outright the reality of that imagined hate, hoping to persuade him "That's not true." Recalling that incident, he writes: "It was not that remark that inhibited his feelings, because he knew what he felt better than she did. The restraint was her removing him physically from the fight." This is a classic encounter between the Christian therapy of anger (deescalation, denial) and the

Gestalt concept of biological rage (assertion, escalation). The snag is not with Portnoy's feelings as a child, but with his rationalization as an adult: the enjoyment of hatred as power.

If the Christian therapy of anger could ever work, it is in such cases as this one. But it never works in the case of sadistic, naughty boys, as is powerfully illustrated in masterpieces like *If* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Of course, neither can Gestalt therapy work in such cases.

Friar Portnoy to the contrary, it seems doubtful that Christian tradition has disregarded or minimized the importance of anger. The Bible is swarming with angry characters, so much so that writers like Valéry and Gide suggest that it is in part a mirror of childlike behavior, a catalogue of unjustified and irrational wrathfulness. Its positive heroes, mainly the prophets, are not at all "repressed." At times they are resentful, piqued, impatient, galled, self-righteous, savage, or losing control at the slightest provocation. The essential thing, however, is that they are genuinely moved by moral indignation. Christianity shifted the emphasis from wrath to compassion. It taught us to handle hostility, not through unrelieved repression, but gently, as a disease or weakness to be looked after.

Portnoyan theology not only accuses Christianity of having blocked the neurotic mechanism of hostility, but also empties anger itself of its ethical quality, completely severing it from any tie with *justice*. No wonder the punishment of sin becomes absurd. There is not a single hint of social or individual ethical indignation in "Speaking From the Body"; there is no allusion to the anger of the oppressed, the humiliated, or the deprived, to the collective wrath of humanity or any part of it. Rather, what so mightily bothers the theologian is the denial of his right to biological, unconsciously vegetative, blind, and infantile anger, a right expressed in the tremendous possibilities of his beautifully arched muscles. This is offered as the last word in radical theology, or the theology of "bodily liberation."

The neofascist cult of anger regards it as a sacrosanct source of energy, suggesting with feigned innocence that it is worthier to unleash the physiological, violent, biogenetic rage than to cope with it, as advocated in Gestalt psychology. The problem it poses is a central cultural one. *One has no right to victimize others in order to devictimize oneself.* This is not a

quotation, but a commonsense rule of enduring value today when so many sectors of private or collective life seem to be returning to the style of irresponsibility and gratuitous cruelty that made fascism possible. It is the message of Dostoevski and, more recently, of Solzhenitsyn.

Portnoy's denial of original and personal sin, of guilt and evil, is fervent. In truth, the doctrine of original sin often functioned historically to exacerbate the guilt of neurotic individuals. This explains the popular and probably commendable trend in psychiatry and theology to try and free human beings from guilt feelings by stressing the universal redemptive value of Christ's death. Then too there is an increasing awareness of the difference between guilt that is pathological and sound feelings of moral responsibility. But Portnoy's concern is of a quite different sort. He uses psychology to oppose the doctrine of original sin, raising plausible philosophic objections against universal or collective guilt, in an attempt to absolve his own personal offenses against elementary decency and/or moral law. His patent irresponsibility in promoting the cult of anger and the fetishism of his body must be morally legitimated. Of course, one should not take boyish peccadillos for signs of serious wrongdoing. But it is an ethical impropriety to shirk the consequences of objective guilt by destroying it altogether, to dismiss all feelings of guilt as Christian "brainwashing." The all-out attack on the concept of guilt becomes the pretext for evading all moral duty, for challenging responsibility and solidarity and having them eventually nullify each other. It functions as an excuse for moral indifference. Actually, it is Portnoy who places the responsibility for every feeling of guilt on religion, and not the other way around. He has no use for the notion that egocentricity makes sinners of us all.

Becoming guiltily aware of egocentricity may not alter the course of humanity for the better. But against Portnoy's false gospel of *kitsch*, it needs to be asserted, the tragedy of guilt is not the guilt feeling but the lack of it, or of any anxiety about it. This is the tragedy of Camus's Meursault, of Robert Musil's Törless, and of Sartre's Daniel. The prospect of body-centricity is not only liquidation of spirituality but of civilization as such. And this not by theoretical implication or deduction but here and now.