



Post-Frankenstein; the Postmodern Subjectivity in Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to depict the transformation of the postmodern subject into Post-Frankenstein in the world devoid of any symbolic authorities. In order to achieve this goal, Slavoj Žižek's main ideas regarding postmodernism, namely "show it all" or "tell it all", in the context of the sexual revolution in 1960s are applied to Philip Roth's two works, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Consequently the creation of Post-Frankenstein through numerous psychological disorders such as neurosis, paranoia, and pathological narcissism are studied in order to present Post-Frankenstein as the final step in de-subjectivization in the postmodern life.

Keywords: Subjectivization, Post-Frankenstein, Pathological narcissism, "Show it all", Postmodern subject

1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Background

The effacement of authority in the postmodern era initiates the controversial subjectivization resulting in the creation of postmodern subjects. With the advent of postmodernism, personal freedom of choice replaces the symbolic authority which results in subjectivity. Consistent with Slavoj Žižek, the postmodern subjects are living in an epoch which lacks any authorities or a paternal figure in order to oblige the subjects to perform their special rituals. On the other hand, an illusory liberty is granted to subjects which results in Žižekian "telling it all" or "showing it all" in the field of film and literature. The alleged illusory liberty operates in the domain of postmodern superego. Contrary to the paternal authority enjoining on the subjects to do an action, the postmodern superego fabricates a liberal context in which a subject is offered various choices. However, the clandestine operation of the choices could restrict the subject more than the classical restriction. As Žižek states in his paper called "You May" published in *London Review of Books* "[t]he trick performed by the superego is to seem to offer the child a free choice, when, as every child knows, he is not being given any choice at all. (1999, p.5)

The postmodern subject devoid of big Other's domination over their decisions and choices "and in the absence of the prohibitions of the symbolic Father, the [postmodernist]subject's inherent reflexivity manifests itself in paranoia, in submission to forms of subjection, and in pathological narcissism" (Wood, 2012, p.35). The psychological disorders of the postmodernism never stop short and exceed hysteria, psychosis or even neurosis. Although the ongoing death of the authority set the subjects free of the shackles of "not show-it-all", they controversially attempt to fabricate other imaginary boundaries to confine them with in order to achieve more pleasure by restrictions, since according to Lacan the means of getting pleasure is the main source of jouissance, not the end. Remarkably enough, these thorough changes were concurrent with the advent of postmodernism and the sexual revolution of 1960s until 1980s in the western world.

Contemporaneous with the unshackled subjectivity in the postmodernism, there raised a tendency among the writers of fiction and the directors of the cinema to bring to life the notorious and villainous Frankenstein (the creation, not the creator), the existence of which appropriately fits the new era and the postmodern subjects with their unfettered abilities. As a matter of fact, the death of the Symbolic order announces the end of any religions or morality and the commencement of a viciously competitive period in which one's goal is the ultimate end and the other's goal is absolutely trivial. The consequence of this ruthless self-interest situation is the creation of the pathological narcissist Post-Frankenstein.

1.2 Contextual Milieu

The dates in which *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) were written are chronologically significant. *Portnoy's Complaint* was written in 1969, embedded in the flustered period of Sexual Revolution (1960s-1980s). The Sexual Revolution included the normalization of homosexuality, premarital sexual relations, pornography, explicit sexual scenes in the media and legalization of abortion and contraception throughout western world (Escoffier). Even if this period is not known as the exclusive cause of postmodernism, their correspondence is undeniable. As a matter of fact, what Žižek avers as "telling it all" or "showing it all" can be associated with correspondence between Sexual Revolution and postmodernism. On the other hand the students and workers' upheavals against the government

in France in May 1968, beginning with the student occupation protest and carrying on with the workers' strike prepared the background for the writing of one of the influential texts for the emergence of the poststructuralist criticism, namely "The Death of the Author", written in 1968 by Roland Barthes in which he introduces the demise of all kinds of authorities corresponding with Žižek's idea of the death of Symbolic authority or the big Other, both introduce the advent of postmodernism. Thus one of the key points regarding postmodernism is the notion of boundless sexuality in the author-less world.

2. Discussion

2.1 *Superego's Command; "show it all"*

The depiction of promiscuity, auto-eroticism, and homosexual and sadomasochistic relations in most of Philip Roth's novels demonstrates the vast impact of sexual liberation and postmodernism. "In the 'private sphere', the surfeit of private choice is now (paradoxically) giving rise to modes of free choice of subjection, Žižek suggests. The most eminent example of this is the growing tendency of Subjects to embrace sadomasochistic sexual practices. In such practices, Žižek suggests, the object of subjects' desire is not anything that has been precluded by symbolic Law" (Sharpe, 2004, p.179).

As Žižek's notable critiques of postmodernism that devoid of big Other's domination over their decisions and choices "and in the absence of the prohibitions of the symbolic Father, the [postmodernist]subject's inherent reflexivity manifests itself in paranoia, in submission to forms of subjection, and in pathological narcissism" (Wood, 2012, p.35). Paranoia as the symptom of postmodernism is the subject of various movies and literary texts, in which the characters (in the absence of symbolic authority) are inquired to uncover their destiny as pathological narcissists.

Philip Roth in his novels, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*, attempted to discover the same truth about his main characters, Alexander Portnoy and Mickey Sabbath, who are desperately in search of their identity (mainly sexual identity) in the vast horizon of Author-less world. *Portnoy's Complaint* written in 1969 introduces Alexander into postmodern stage, devoid of boundaries and the big Other's prohibitions and impeccably sketches his anxieties in contrast to the absolute freedom that grants no soothing and grows concerns. Alex who is a free subject at the age of 35 is frantically in search of the little big Other as a substitute for the real big Other demised in postmodernism. The act of "telling it all" undoubtedly occurs in this novel, which is all about the characterization of the protagonist's promiscuity without any censorship, in other words an over-proximity to the Real. "Over-proximity to the Real" according to Žižek is the main cause of anxiety in most of the contemporary movies and novels. Žižek affirms that the act of "telling it all" does not refer to freedom and boundlessness; however, it depicts the subject's anxiety in the giant and master-less world, "what if, by way of 'filling in the gaps' and 'telling it all', what we retreat from is the void as such, which, of course, is ultimately none other than the void of subjectivity (the Lacanian 'barred subject')?" (Žižek, 2001, p.147)

Thus, "Showing it all" or "Telling it all" is a reactionary substitute for the lost order (that of big Other) in the void of subjectivity. The question raised at this stage is why the subject attempts to replace the real big Other with the little big Others and why can't he easily enjoy being free? According to Žižek "telling it all" is a reaction to attain a fictional symbolic efficiency. Symbolic efficiency stands for all the subjects' attempt to uncover their positions in the society for the big Other. This notion denotes the fact that the subject for instance does not become the strongest person in the world, unless an authority such as Guinness World Records validates it. Nonetheless he/she does not become the strongest person in the world just by his/her own affirmation. Due to the fact that there is no big Other or any other symbolic authorities in postmodern era, the subjects endeavor in vain to make their status and identity known to all the people.

Through *Portnoy's Complaint* Alexander as the analysand considers Dr. spielvogel, his psychiatrist as the knowing-all agent with the intention that his analyst act as the little big Other and can certify his deeds. This could be the reason Alexander begins to relate all his covert and overt deeds to his only certifier or in other words, his signifier. This relation is absolutely similar to the old God-man relation that no secret stays unveiled. What modern and classical subjects enjoyed by the secrecy of their acts, especially sexual ones, except God, the postmodern agents cannot, since there is no authority to question *laissez-faire*, and the postmodern superego's command is more like "Enjoy" than "be steadfast": "Lacan's fundamental thesis is that superego in its most fundamental dimension is an *injunction to enjoyment*: the various forms of superego commands are nothing but variations on the same motif: 'Enjoy! ...Superego marks a point at which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy'" (Žižek, 2002, p.237).

The varying conditions regarding the superego and Law consistent with Lacan and Žižek's notions in the postmodern era are not of the confinement, but of the *carte blanche*, the total freedom to act on your own. However, the paradox arises when the same superego's command of "Enjoy" is in fact an enormous shackle to which the subjects are restrained, since the subjects take pleasure in the challenge and the adventure on the direction of reaching *jouissance*, not the ready at hand pleasure. As far as the agency of the law invites the subjects to the free joy, the joy falls out of interest.

2.2 *Narcissism and the Creation of Post-Frankenstein*

The symptoms of narcissism stand out in Roth's both novels. For instance, in *Portnoy's Complaint* Alexander always exaggerates his position as the Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the City of New York. He sees the Monkey (his girlfriend) as a downgrading element in his life, therefore he is so worried about a meeting between her and his boss, although the sexual intercourse with her is so gratifying. Alexander never belittled himself in his sessions

with Dr. Spielvogel and attempted to justify all his faults with his relationship with his mother. As a matter of fact, the beginning of *Portnoy's Complaint*, where Roth acknowledges Portnoy's Complaint as a symptom of psychological disorder, he mentions the same point about Alexander's relationship with his mother, "It is believed by Spielvogel that many of the symptoms can be traced to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship" (Roth, 1969, p. III).

Autoeroticism could be considered as another symptom of narcissistic behavior. Although Lacan believes all kinds of sexual gratification are masturbatory and one-sided, the autoerotic act signifies the human being's self-love in itself. One may express that autoeroticism is operating on the basis of Fantasy. One fantasizes about an ideal (it could be a woman, an object, or a fetishistic stimulus) while auto-eroticizing; however, the question being raised here is what does this fantasy signify? Does it not represent an ideal picture of his/her own, being reflected on the surface of the fantasy-object? Or in Lacanian terms, does it not denote that by fantasy, the subject attempts to cover the void by the *objet petit a*, "the chimerical object of fantasy" to answer the question *Che vuoi?* Thus the big Other is a void (revealed to the subject only in postmodernism), the subject is void, and there is no ideal picture at all, even *objet petit a* cannot be materialized, let alone be symbolized. These facts give rise to Lacanian "[t]here is no such thing as sexual relationship".

Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void. "There is no sexual relationship," and this impossibility is filled out by the fascinating fantasy-scenario - that is why fantasy is, in the last resort, always a fantasy of the sexual relationship, a staging of it. As such, fantasy is not to be interpreted, only "traversed": all we have to do is experience how there is nothing "behind" it, and how fantasy masks precisely this "nothing". (Žižek, 1989, p.141)

The notable fact is what may befall on the postmodern subject for whom fantasy cannot act as a panacea anymore, since the symbolic authority is shattered for him and the void has become visible. This is the response which Lacan gives to his readers: "Lacan's answer, in the last pages of his Seminar XI, is drive, ultimately the death drive: 'beyond fantasy' there is no yearning or any kindred sublime phenomenon, 'beyond fantasy' we find only drive, its pulsation around the *sinthome*" (Žižek, 1989, p.139). The time when there is no other borderline beyond the boundaries the subject has surpassed, death will be the only territory not being outdone. It is remarkable to note that death drive associates the subject to the act, the very Lacanian act to which the whole feminine essence is attributed. The act is akin to the revolt against all the inhibitions confining the subjects.

Pathological narcissism is a psychological disorder, unlike neurosis and hysteria, the narcissist does not want to be the object of Other's desire, or he does not want to convince any other agents. What a pathological narcissist does is to satisfy himself, and in this satisfaction he doesn't care for any other person or any communities or authorities' good. He misuses all the subjects and rules to gratify his own desires. "The narcissistic subject knows only the "rules of the (social) game" enabling him to manipulate others; social relations constitute for him a playing field in which he assumes "roles," not proper symbolic mandates; he stays clear of any kind of binding commitment that would imply a proper symbolic identification" (Žižek, 1992, p.102). For a narcissist even the language with all its signifiers and signified turns into a language denoting all his desires and the ways of their gratification: "The paradox of the 'pathological narcissist' is, however, that for him, language does indeed function according to the theory of description: the meaning of words is reduced to the positive features of the denoted object, above all those that concern his narcissistic interests" (Žižek, 1992, p.103). Mickey Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theater* is undeniably the master of language of pornography. In the transcription of one of the long telephone conversations with his student, attached to the end of one of the chapters of the novel (1995, p.215), Sabbath uses the language of sex so skillfully that the reader may revere him as the "Evangelist of Fornication".

As it was mentioned, Pathological narcissism is one of the symptoms of postmodernism as the result of the demise of any authorities with which the subjects are restricted. However, Portnoy and Sabbath's issue is not limited in this symptom. It goes off the limits as far as Portnoy's problem is not just neurosis and Sabbath's, pathological narcissism. In the course of the novel the reader can catch a glimpse of hysteria and paranoia in both works. Alexander's fascination and obsession with his mother until the end of the novel and the fear of her acknowledgement of his affairs and on the other hand his altruistic feeling and the troubled conscience because of the negligence of the religious and moral affairs has turned him into a hysteric subject. The panic caused by the mother-knife (phallic mother who threatens his son with a knife) penetrated his unconscious that he could not come out of it, "Who else do you know whose mother actually threatened him with the dreaded knife? Who else was so lucky as to have the threat of castration so straight-forwardly put by his momma?" (Roth, 1969, p.290). The hysteria of leading a moral life and satisfying mother had merged into each other and appeared in the body of a girl he visited in Israel: "I associate her instantly with my lost Pumpkin, when in physical type she is, of course, my mother. Coloring, size, even temperament, it turned out a real fault-finder, a professional critic of me. Must have perfection in her men. But all this I am blind to: the resemblance between this girl and the picture of my mother in her high school yearbook is something I do not even see" (ibid. 292). By seducing the soldier-girl who was fighting for her beliefs, Alex wanted to gratify his mother's desires (as far as she is the replica of her mother) and on the other he wished for satiating his own desires of being a moral and religious person through copulating with her.

Alternatively, Sabbath is not a sole narcissist who doesn't care for anything except his own desires. Paranoia and hysteria are persistently present in the novel as well. The presence/ absence of Nikki, Sabbath's first wife, in his life changes Sabbath into a paranoid subject who is desperately in search of her. It is mentioned in the course of the novel that Nikki disappeared one night, simultaneous with Sabbath's unfaithful relationship with Roseanna (his second wife).

In some parts of the novel Sabbath even mentions that he murdered Nikki. The reader could not decide precisely whether he killed her or lost her, but what could be ascertained in this novel is that the focalizer's mind is a paranoid mind which is haunted by the image of his wife, searching everywhere, but finding no traces of her. After he bought the grave for his own body, he recollected the inscription on his grave monument as well:

Morris Sabbath
 "Mickey"
 Beloved Whoremonger,
 Seducer,
 Sodomist, Abuser of Women,
 Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth,
 Uxoricide,
 Suicide
 1929–1994(Roth, 1995, p.376)

New York, the city where most of the important incidents of Sabbath's life have occurred, there is also the notable stimulus of his paranoia:

In New York her disappearance was all he could think about—out on the streets it was obsessional, it had no end—and this was why he'd never returned. Back when he was still in their apartment on St. Marks Place, he never went out that he did not think he would pass her in the street, and so he looked at everybody and started following people. If a woman was tall and had the right hair—not that Nikki couldn't have dyed hers or taken to wearing a wig—he would follow her until he caught up and then he would measure himself against the person and, if she was about right, would step around to look directly at her face—Let me see if this is Nikki! It never was. (ibid. 126)

As Žižek maintains in *Looking Awry* when pathological narcissism merges into paranoia and hysteria the uncertainty about one's identity emerges: "And the way to hystericize the "pathological narcissist" is precisely to force upon him some symbolic mandate that cannot be grounded in its properties. Such a confrontation brings about the hysterical question, 'Why am I what you are saying that I am?'" (Žižek, 1991, p.104). This is the identical question that both Alexander Portnoy and Mickey Sabbath are seeking out to find an answer for, Alex by going to Israel and in search of his "lost Pumpkin" indentifying himself with the saints and soldiers, and Mickey by a journey in New York in search of his lost object, as a matter of fact in pursuit of himself. The notable fact is that inquiring one's identity is the consequence of postmodernism, when the subject's true self, the void, has been exposed. Thus the chief concern of the subjects in these novels and most of the other postmodern novels is the pursuit for the lost identity, the filling in the gap. One of the approaches in this pursuit is mastering sexuality. As far as sexuality plays a significant role in creating personalities and is one of the targets of postmodernism in exposure, the characters in these novels focus on this fact, regardless of the point that the more they follow sexuality, the more they are distracted from their real identity, since Žižek's notion, "there is no such thing as sexual relationship" verifies this point as well.

2.3 *The Post-Frankenstein: A Subject-Apocalypse*

The rationale behind recounting these entire symptoms recurrent in these novels and the postmodern life is to elucidate the new phenomenon of Post-Frankenstein. The story of Frankenstein has turned into a well-known reference for most gothic and horror movies of the twenty and twenty-first century that approximately over two hundred works of fiction and movies have been restating this story in different ways. *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), written by Marry Shelley at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is the gothic story of Victor Frankenstein's horrendous and shocking creation in Geneva. The disparity and the loneliness of this creature turned him against all mankind, even his own creator, Victor. Victor dies in pursuit of the creature and the creature disappears from that moment. This story brings into mind two important facts: First the lethality of the profane act of trespassing the boundaries of creation/Creator, and secondly the signification of the death of the creator as the authority, and simultaneously the disappearance of the creation, or to be concise the death of subjectivity. The second point is notable, since it makes the analogy between this story and the postmodernist period possible. Frankenstein (the creation) is akin to the postmodern subject and Victor as the god-like authority. Until the time the authority is present, the subject is present as well, however, when the authority dies the subject disappears, since what defines subject is his/her position of subjectivity. Subjectivity cannot stand on its own. In fact subjects should be subjectivized comparing to something out of the sphere of meaning, and that is the big Other. therefore when the big Other passes away, the subjects are no longer subject to anything, the shackles of humanity is broken and the subjects are taken to the verge of egotism or narcissism.

All in all, for an egotistic creation similar to Frankenstein or it is better to entitle it as Post-Frankenstein, nothing is important. What he/she craves for is jouissance, the pure pleasure without restraint, however, even the pure pleasure cannot satiate the subjects, given that his/her loneliness and unrestraint do not challenge the subject. From another point of view, the subtitle of this story, *the Modern Prometheus*, is significant as far as Prometheus was the Titan who created man out of clay and gave mankind fire, which is the symbol of progression and civilization. However, due to this transgression Zeus punished him by an eagle feeding from his liver. The notable fact is that Mary Shelley compared Victor to Prometheus, being punished terribly throughout the story because of this transgression. Keeping in mind this

profanity as well as taking into account the Nietzschean Madman's speech regarding the death of god, the reader will presume that by killing god, the subjects have done great harm to themselves, since according to Lacan and Žižek god was dead beforehand, but he was unconscious about it. From the Žižekian point of view, there are no symbolic authorities at all; this is the subject's unconscious that believes there is something or someone to be obeyed, however, the postmodern period has laid open all the secrets by "telling it all". Now that in the current era the verity of god's demise has been said out loud, the unconscious is disturbed and could not return to its former status. This is the moment when the function of Law and superego dissolves as well, and superego's restraining command changes to the command of joy.

3. Conclusion

The fatality of the emergence of postmodernism on the subjects could not be overlooked, since the symptoms of this period could be easily detected in most of their lives. The egotism or, in extreme cases, the pathological narcissism is one of the numerous symptoms, which is the direct consequence of the effacement of any symbolic authorities. As Nietzsche declared ahead of his time through the Madman that "God is Dead" (Nietzsche, 1882), it was just the 19th century. In point of fact, he had foreseen the postmodern catastrophe, the time when all subjects are paralyzed by this immeasurable murder they have committed. "Do we not hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition?—Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" (Nietzsche, 1882, p.125)

The pathological narcissism is the one Žižek emphasized in most of his works. On the other hand the researcher endeavors to attribute more symptoms to these subjects, concerning the characterization of these two novels. Hysteria, neurosis, and thanatophilia are all present in these two novels. Regarding these two novels as the succession of each other, the progression of these symptoms becomes more palpable. The researcher argues that these symptoms could be attributed to real postmodern life, where under the cover of pretention and keeping face is the hidden narcissism and hysteria, and in some cases neurosis which the era has taught the subjects to conceal. At this point the notion of Post-Frankenstein is brought up into consideration. It is exclaimed that Post-Frankenstein is the product of the postmodern death of authority, and consequently death of subjectivity. This is the Post-Frankenstein, akin to postmodern subject, who kills the big Other, assuming he/she will seize the power, negligent of the fact that without authority there is no power at all, since the whole void inside the subjectivity is revealed.

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