2016

The Hidden Hand: Rubbing Out The Masturbation Narratives in "Ulysses", "Lolita" and "Portnoy's Complaint"

Nicholas Sanford Kiersted
Bard College

The Hidden Hand:
Rubbing Out the Masturbation Narratives in Ulysses, Lolita, and Portnoy's Complaint

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

Of Bard College

by

Nicholas S. Kiersted

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my mother, father, brother and sister for supporting me through the years. Special thanks to my advisor on this project, Stephen Graham, for all of his help along the way and for persevering with me. Thank you to Terry Dewsnap for his insights on my Joyce chapter and to all of the Bard professors who I have had the honor of learning from. Thank you also to Ben Beckley for his assistance in writing this essay.

Table of Contents:

I. Introduction

In the 20th century so many important novels contained scenes depicting masturbation that it warrants analysis as a literary theme. In this essay I will show the way masturbation informs a verisimilar yet fantasized narrative in three works of 20th century literature: *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, and *Portnoy's Complaint* by Philip Roth. My goal in this essay is to analyze the way in which masturbation is a key to understanding the lasting *substantial* material that the fantasized narrative is based upon. I will show how in all three works the narrator composes his narrative towards a masturbatory end, which is usually, but not always, an orgasm. I will then show the "real" *substantial* subject matter that the fantasy is based upon, wherein lies the *true* aesthetic beauty of these novels. The result is that in all three texts the physical act of masturbation is generally obscured (*Portnoy's Complaint* being the obvious exception), but the fantasy occupies the large parts of the narrative, while a good chunk of *substantial* material is drastically marginalized. I show the way this severely marginalized material ultimately triumphs over and invalidates the purported authenticity of much of the fabricated narrative, or at the very least draws the narrative closer to reality. Because of this much of the narrative can often be dismissed as the narrator's "fancy lies"—but lies are significant too, and it usually through these lies that the reader comes to some understanding of the the novels aesthetic effect.

* * *

Masturbation is necessarily always proximate to sexual fantasy. These three books, however, display an independently-minded (or maybe "selfish" is a better word) deliberate exertion of effort to orchestrate the details of a fantasy. The trouble, as it becomes more

apparent in *Lolita* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, is when the deliberate effort extends beyond the realm of fantasy and into reality as it becomes consequential to other human beings. A "sexual fantasy" implies the interaction of two human beings, manifesting physically the pleasure derived from their fantasy in physical sexual energy, towards a mutual end of achieving an orgasm for both parties. A "masturbatory fantasy" on the other hand is solely concerned with the orgasm of the fantasizer. The fantasy's content is "sexual", but it is diverted towards a singular end, the orgasm of the masturbator alone.

After some sleuth work the reader can reject the idea that Humbert's pet "Lolita" ever *really* existed outside of Humbert's psyche in the first place. In denying "Lolita"s existence we affirm the existence and agency of Dolores Haze. However, where once there was a false "Lolita" seen it becomes apparent to the reader, just like does to Humbert, that we do not really know a thing about her. Consequently, whatever substance Dolores Haze is given has to be reconciled with the image present in Humbert's narrative. The same can be said of Gerty MacDowell in *Ulysses* once the sentimental narrative mode that the episode begins in subsides the only substantial image remaining of her is her "dignified" yet crippled walk down the beach. On the other hand, in *Portnoy's Complaint* the narrator describes masturbation multiple times, but he is not masturbating while narrating. My rule that a narrator that is actively masturbating is inherently unreliable cannot be applied to Portnoy since he is not *physically* masturbating in Spielvogel's office. It follows that Portnoy's narrative contains, at least, a portion of true substantial material but it has been botched by his forceful insertion into *his own* narrative. Portnoy's crude speech and bawdy humor mislead one into thinking that the book is far less sophisticated than Joyce and Nabokov's novels. Reordering the narrative vignettes into their proper sequence, however,

reveals that Portnoy's sessions with Spielvogel are an attempt to deliberately (albeit, subconsciously perhaps) manufacture a false understanding of order (or 'cause and effect'), a phenomenon that is characteristic of masturbatory fantasy. The narrative that Portnoy comes up with, is so conspicuously sensationalized that it results in various forms of impotence: social impotence, sexual impotence (with an Israeli girl) and the linguistic impotence with which he ends his monologue: "Aaaa[…]aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!!!" (274).

"Masturbatory fantasy" will be treated in the analyses that follow as a phenomenon that is distinct from (or at the very least a sub-category of) sexual fantasy. The fantasies in these books are not "masturbatory" exclusively because they are ruminations of a sexually provocative nature, but because of a characteristic oversight of *unpleasant* details. In the masturbatory fantasies that these books present the narrators seem to subconsciously rearrange details to arrive at a pleasing sense of "order" which marries neatly to their intention of achieving an orgasm. On the other hand, a *conscious re*-ordering of details in these books will allow the reader to arrive at an entirely different understanding of the novel's "reality" than the narrator has perceived. The bizarre nature of these conclusions is that they are deduced from the narrator's account, which implies that either a *cunning* narrator has left an evident paper trail of prose leading back to the original plot material or an *ignorant* narrator has not gleaned the substantial matter of the story they are telling. Once the substantial matter has been realized by the reader it becomes difficult to read the narrative again without a sense of disappointment. For example, in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses,* once it becomes apparent that Gerty MacDowell has a "lame leg" the sentimentally hopeful narrative that precedes can only be read as gravely disappointing. In this regard the narrative is, at first, quite pleasant (Joyce, in fact, emulates the style of

contemporary popular literature), then subsequently disappointing because the "beautiful" picture that has been depicted has been defeated by the reader's understanding of the real circumstances of the characters involved. There is, however, some amount of lasting beauty in each text. Gerty's entire fantasy seems so far from reality by the time she displays her lame leg, but nonetheless the she walks away with "dignity". Her limp is an undoubtable confirmation of her imperfection, but she is also ostensibly unashamed by virtue of the dignity that she carries herself with. Rereading "Nausicaa" episode one cannot help but see the unfortunate disconnect between the limping Gerty and the sentimentally embellished Gerty who was "pronounced beautiful by all that who knew her" (348)—a pronouncement that seems uncharacteristic coming from Joyce's Dubliners, much less *all* of them. Nonetheless, the limp is the one detail of Gerty's character that is beyond doubt, forever changing the way we read about that "specimen of winsome Irish girlhood" (348), but the "dignity" that accompanies the limp makes her more admirable than ugly.

Masturbation in these books acts as a door between reality and the masturbator's imagination. In the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* it is Bloom's orgasm that begins the detumescence into reality, and the realization of Gerty's limp is the point at which the prose reverts back to Bloom's stream-of-consciousness. It is through Humbert Humbert's masturbation that nearly the entirety of *Lolita* develops. *Portnoy's Complaint,* on the other hand, seems to deviate from this idea. Portnoy's masturbatory imagination (or subconscious negligence) oppresses him. It has the capacity to bring his sister's empty brassiere to life, but Portnoy also shows no ability to *turn off* his masturbatory imagination. Ironically, he talks at great length about his masturbation as though it were contributing (at

least partially) to his unrest. *It does* cause him irrational unrest, but the problem is just that: *irrational*.

There is also a treatment of aesthetics in this study. I felt this was necessary due masturbation's suggestion of pornographic stimulus. I cite, and subsequently challenge, Thomas Aquinas' theories of beauty in my *Ulysses* chapter. Thomas Aquinas described beauty as "that which pleases when seen". The aim of aesthetic art is to create something beautiful, but what happens if that objective is never accomplished? Aquinas attributed two appetites to the human psyche: the *aesthetic* and the *sexual*. When the sexual appetite is unable to be satisfied by sexual intercourse whether by a lack of prospective partners or rejection by prospective partners, masturbation serves as a logical substitute. Abstinence is another option, but this does not *satisfy* the sexual appetite. Stephen Dedalus shows us, and only manages to present an ideal that is almost certainly unattainable in the real world by virtue of his insistence that the highest (and only) example of beauty is God, Himself. What most extant art represents, by this logic, is a "masturbatory" aesthetic substitute by Aquinas' definition.

The criteria for the three novels included in this study was simple: they must all contain at least one isolated instance of masturbation. This essay, however, will focus primarily on the more abstract aspects of masturbation as it pertains to the mental faculties and perceived reality. In the first chapter I will begin by explaining the aesthetic theories of a young Stephen Dedalus (sourced from *Stephen Hero, Portrait of the Artist,* and *Ulysses)* and then show how Joyce, in the "Nausicaa" episode mimics the *apprehension of beauty* as described in these theories, but instead of a resonance of the various 'details' we have acquired of Gerty—which should *ideally* result in her becoming an immortal object of

beauty—the character we have conceived from originally sentimental prose is obliterated by the revelation of her 'lame leg' after Bloom has had an orgasm. Her character splits into two (or more) possible, though indefinite, characters that may only develop further in the imagination of the reader. At this point I will point out how it becomes apparent that the Gerty that continues to resonate in our imagination is nothing more than a subject of our own *fantasies* of her, which are constructed and informed by a very limited amount of observable reality. The imaginative faculty here works in a manner that is *masturbatory* and self-serving, but the eventual image of a fully-formed character implies an impregnation and gestation from the cellular version of that character that was present in the original novel.

Before I continue I should make a distinction between the way I use the terms 'narrative' and 'plot' in this essay. When I use the word 'plot' I do not merely mean a trajectory of events as they are presented in a novel, but *all* of the events that the text implies, including those details that are either altered or omitted. I make this distinction because there are a lot of plot details that are not of narrative focus within *Ulysses, Lolita,* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, but the material is nonetheless present in the narrative in some capacity. I would call this the 'substance' of the novel. In contradistinction, a 'narrative' shows signs of a narrator's tampering with the 'plot'. In other words, a 'narrative' can be totally fabricated, but the 'plot' is always "true" (at least at it pertains to the novel's reality, which is of course *fiction*). The 'narrative' is not necessarily tampered with by a deliberately deceptive narrator, but the inability to depict a "complete event" and all the sensory phenomena implied by that event is an inevitable shortcoming of any written language that one should be constantly conscious of. No 'real event' (even historical events)

will ever be depicted completely in written form in a manner that fully portrays every sensation experienced from that event. The best a *non*-fiction writer could do would be to provide multiple accounts of an event as means of arriving at an 'accepted history' common to a particular people. All this does, however, is provide an amalgamated perception derived from a collection of sources (a perception that perhaps no single person has of the event in question) instead of a singular perception. A narrator (i.e. author or fictitious narrator such as Humbert or Portnoy) is therefore always selective in the way in which they portray something, but this selectivity can be accredited to one of three sources: 1) a deliberate effort to mislead the reader (i.e. a conscious effort), 2) an oversight on the part of the narrator (i.e. subsconscious repression of unfavorable details), or 3) the narrator's ineptitude to effectively use their idiom to create a narrative that they see suiting to the contents they are trying to transmit (a good example of this last type of narrative would be Benjy Compson from Faulkner's "Sound and the Fury" whose mental handicap often makes his narrative unclear). This third example is the only one that can be said to be inherently devoid of "masturbatory" motives because it is based on a deficiency rather than being 'self-serving'. Nonetheless, every narrator is to some degree handicapped in their use of words which are inevitably always reductive, however, great authors (such as I deal with in this essay) use this to their advantage. No matter what the reason, a written narrative only ever depicts an incomplete image. Whatever completeness it is given is sourced from the imagination of the reader. For this reason, the third example I have given will always be present in any narrative, even as the deficiency is used by the author advantageously.

In some works of fiction—as is the case in the three books I deal with in this essay—there is often a rich background of *absent* material (material that is written but omitted

from the narrative) that constitute the substance but is constantly obscured by either the narrator's subconscious departure from reality (as in *Portnoy*) or the narrator's seemingly deliberate effort to mislead the reader (as in *Lolita*). It is only by way of recognizing the narrator's inherent deficiency in creating a narrative that one can begin to glean a more concrete and multi-dimensional plot that is obscured behind the provided narrative.

Revelation of a *subplot* is ironically only possible by means of what I call *intellectual intercourse* (a type of active engagement) with the text. I call it *intellectual intercourse* because I believe it resembles the abstract components of sexual activity, regardless of the genders of the parties involved. Joyce gives this phenomenon of interaction between the text and the reader a different name: "epiphany". I find "intellectual intercourse" a more suiting name, since the result is that characters that are rendered lifeless by narrative reduction go through a process of gestation in our minds as we "mentally grope" (as Stephen Dedalus might say) at isolated details of their background stories. The full scene at Sandymount Strand in the "Nausicaa" episode is most vibrantly illustrated once the simultaneously fanciful and misleading prose of the episode's first half is married with the reality that obliterates it following Bloom's orgasm. Bloom's orgasm and the subsequent detumescence of narrative style brings into question the validity of all the details that precede it. All of the details that precede his orgasm and their inflation of Bloom's character. It is only after his orgasm, after all, that the fantasy begins to subside and the true identity of the masturbator is revealed: "Leopold Bloom (for it is he) stands silent" (*U* 367). After that point Gerty becomes crippled by reality and hobbles out of Bloom's life (at least until she manifests herself in Bloom's psyche in "Circe"). The single detail of her lame leg, however, is one of the only details that persists.

Whether it's the tumescence and detumescence of prose in “Nausicaa”, the imprisonment of solipsistic fantasy in *Lolita* or the jerking of the plot into a psychoanalytical narrative in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, all of these works use masturbation as a structuring tool in some way. Dismantling and rubbing out the structure is half the fun of reading the respective narratives.

II. "A Dream of Wellfilled Hose": The Erotic Image of Decorum in "Nausicaa"

The "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* begins in a style that seems uncharacteristic of Joyce's other writing in its apparent simplicity but is at the same time pleasantly readable since it is not as dependent on esoteric references as other episodes in the novel. The narrative is of an ostensibly omniscient third-person perspective and focalizes the sentimental musings of Gerty MacDowell as she sits upon the rocks at Sandymount Strand thinking about past loves and a potential love affair with the "foreigner" watching her from afar (this is, in fact, Bloom). Despite being told from a third-person perspective the narrative demonstrates a conspicuous fancy for Gerty, urging her on as though she were doing the narrating herself. It also notably inflates Leopold Bloom's character in a manner that is quite flattering but inconsistent with how he is depicted in other parts of *Ulysses*. The narrative, despite favoring the ever-proper Gerty, effects and image that is erotic enough for Bloom to masturbate to. The narrative only shifts into the more Joycean stream-of-consciousness style of narrative after Bloom experiences an orgasm and it is at this point that it becomes apparent that Bloom has been obscurely masturbating during the preceding narrative. The narrative concerns itself so exclusively to pleasing the reader that it frivolously disregards reality. The most telling ways that it does so are its omission of Gerty's crippled leg and glossing over of Bloom's masturbation. As I said before, the narrative is pleasant, but since there is no trace of these two significant details it becomes difficult to regard any of its other contents as truthful. Therefore, those details—like everything else, as Bloom ruminates—fade away into nothing. This is true of most details in the narrative, but his masturbation and Gerty's leg leave a lasting impression because they

represent what is "real" in the episode. There is no way to reread this initial portion of the episode without feeling disappointed. A reflection of the narrative's effect after its fallacy has been revealed by Bloom's orgasm and Gerty's leg shows to the reader that the exaggerated prose presents a pleasing but brief and insubstantial image, much like one a masturbator conjures for himself. The realization that Bloom has been masturbating allows one to discern the sexual current that underlies the narrative and elevates it to a level of plausible (yet false) fantasy.

As with many aspects of Joyce's literature the satire of the Nausicaa episode takes more than one form and at times will combine different satirized styles for cumulative effect. Joyce intimated to Frank Budgen in a letter, "*Nausikaa* is written in a namby-pamby jammy marmalady drawersy (alto là!) style with effects of incense, mariolatry, masturbation, stewed cockles, painter's palette, chitchat, circumlocutions, etc. etc." (*SL* 246). "Namby-pamby" describes the gentle aspect of the episode, which is noticeable in its stark contrast to the immediately preceding Cyclops episode in which Bloom is seen in his most defiant state. Declan Kiberd notes that, "Joyce sardonically contrasts the masculine tone of the Irish Revival and the increasingly feminine character of popular culture, which such writing sought to challenge"[i]. A prime example of this type of writing is Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter,* mentioned by Gerty in the "Nausicaa" episode on page 363 and is source from which Joyce borrowed Gerty's name[ii]. "Drawersy" also suggests a mildly pornographic quality to the episode, as does the unequivocal "masturbation". The parenthetical "alto là!" ("Halt!") implies that Joyce is well aware of the boundaries of propriety that he is overstepping in dealing with sexual matters in this episode. Alliterative qualities aside "mariolatry" is not something readers would expect to see side-by-side with

"masturbation", and yet the connection aptly evokes the tone of the Nausicaa episode. The ostensible "beauty" of the episode glosses over a depiction of a masturbating man, an image contrary to that concept of beauty but an affirmation of the sexual appetites at work. Gerty perceives Bloom's lustful gaze as him "literally worshipping at her shrine" (*U* 361) while the temperance retreat is praising the Virgin Mary at The Roman Catholic Church of Mary, Star of the Sea, per Gifford's notes[iii]. Concurrent events such as these characterize the way the episode plays out; there is a verisimilar portrayal of events that is apparent, but there is also a concurrent subplot that the narrative shows traces of but never reveals. The most notable of these concurrences is the explosion of the bizarre fireworks while Bloom has an orgasm. For effect Joyce is deliberately vague with these kinds of associations, giving just enough of a connection so that the dual-meaning fireworks is not readily apparent (and there or occasions where it has gone unnoticed altogether[iv]). However, Joyce provides enough subtle indications that show traces of the subplot (Bloom's masturbation) if one were to reread the narrative after realizing that Bloom has an orgasm at its conclusion. For example, seemingly inconsequential details, such as Bloom "looking up so intently" as Gerty attempts to kick a ball loses the romantic luster that the narrative attributes to it once it is realized that Bloom is masturbating and not merely admiring Gerty.

Declan Kiberd[v] draws attention to the fact that this episode bears a strong resemblance to another passage that Joyce wrote in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which Stephen gazes on a girl at Dollymount. In that passage Stephen reflects to himself:

> She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful sea-bird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and softhued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like featherings of soft white down.

(*PA* 185)

Comparing this scene to "Nausicaa" Declan Kiberd notes, "If on Dollymount Strand all was scaled up as the young man saw a vision of a 'birdgirl', [in Nausicaa] an older man sees the 'seabird' Gerty scaled down to the status of a cripple"[vi]. The passage in *Portrait* is the point at which Stephen realizes his calling as an artist, "greet[ing] the advent of the life that had cried to him" (186), and feels compelled to commit his existence to immortalizing such beautiful moments as he has just experienced. Even though Stephen felt that what he experienced was beautiful, the depiction present in *Portrait* is not necessarily so, at least by his own definition of beauty in the same novel. The fact that "beauty" should compel him to become an artist is in fact contrary to his aesthetic theories which dictate that only "improper art" should incite desire.

On its own the above passage from *Portrait* could certainly be called "beautiful", but if one were to read the "Nausicaa" episode from *Ulysses* immediately afterword they may be skeptical of the origin of the swan girl's beauty: is she beautiful "in reality" or is she embellished by Joyce's sublime pen? There is a notable absence of any mention of defect or any semblance of ugliness in the passage in *Portrait*, but the passage has a mystical tone with mentions of "magic" and suggestion of the girl's transformation into a seabird, reminiscent of the Celtic Twilight tradition as Kiberd points out[vii]. The depiction of Gerty in "Nausicaa" conjures images of this scene from *Portrait*, but the episode's inevitable dissolution into realism (as opposed to reality being embellished into beautiful art in *Portrait*) shows that the aforementioned passage was lacking in something requisite to being beautiful: truth, or at the very least verisimilitude that compels belief. The passage in *Portrait* emphasizes Stephen's apprehension of the beautiful girl on the strand rather than

beautifully depicting the girl. The effect is that while the reader may be able to understand from the text what Stephen felt in witnessing the beautiful "birdgirl" on the beach they are largely deprived of crucial details about this girl's character. Joyce's depiction of her is certainly beautiful, but she is given no background and this makes her seem quite attractice but in a delicate and insubstantial way that depends too much on the reader's agreement with the epithets that the narrator lavishes upon her. Even so, the substance of her beauty *in reality* (as opposed to its depiction in Portrait) is enough to evoke awe in Stephen. Ultimately, if the girl in *Portait* is beautiful then it is hard to say she is anything else based on the information given. She exists solely as an object of an aesthetic experience that inspires Stephen to set out as an artist and depict the beautiful, but her beauty is only ever experienced by the reader in a second-hand manner. Her existence is validated in *Portrait* by the effect that her beautiful image had on Stephen, but her character remains undeveloped in the capacity in which she exists in *Portrait*. On the other hand, Gerty is rather cruelly reduced from a hopeful young Irish lass to her *real* handicapped state. There is, however, something to be admired in the dimension that her unfortunate reality lends to her narrative. Despite her handicap the narrative proclaims that she walks with a "quiet dignity" which requires no small amount of resilience (or "ignorance" if you prefer, though I willfully opt for the former) in a city that is populated by Joyce's oft-cruel Dubliners.

The perspective and style of the first half of the episode are focused on the thoughts and actions of Gerty, leaving Bloom obscured in both name and essence though he is still visibly present. It is not until the second half of the episode that his name is revealed to the reader. The portion of the episode concerned with Gerty is written in a style that is

dramatically sentimental and garish compared to previous episodes, a noticeable departure from the first paragraph:

> The summer evening had begun to fold the world in its mysterious embrace. Far away in the west the sun was setting and the last glow of all too fleeting day lingered lovingly on sea and strand, on the promontory of dear old Howth guarding as ever the waters of the bay, on the weedgrown rocks along Sandymount shore and, last but not least, on the quiet church whence there streamed forth at times upon the stillness the voice of prayer to her who is in her pure radiance a beacon ever to the storm-tossed heart of man, Mary, star of the sea.
> (*U* 346)

Many of the statements in this opening paragraph are indirect but discernibly elevate the present image above its corresponding "reality" by appealing to the reader's definition of beauty and ideal while doing relatively little to define it in qualitatively precise terms. For instance, the term "mysterious" in the opening sentence is meant to allude to some magical quality of the evening and similarly the evening is personified as "embracing" the world. The use of "mysterious" smacks of a narrator who is incapable of finding a suitable word that is less vague, and the personification of the evening is reminiscent of fantasy without being boldly imaginative. Also, the narrative's attempt to qualify the day as "all too fleeting" is a sentimental exaggeration. This is especially true considering that this statement is made three hundred and forty-six pages into an account of a day on which Gifford notes that the sun set at at 8:27PM[viii]; not a short day by comparison to other days though maybe in the eyes of the sentimentalist who feels that all is "fleeting". In the passage given above there is a characteristic sensationalizing of the actual phenomena on which the narrative is based. Instead of direct and lucid speech it defers to a singular *pleasant* interpretation of the day that ignores its own reality—at least until Bloom's orgasm forces that reality into the narrative.

Throughout the episode Bloom is present as an observer though only referred to as "the gentleman" until he is identified by name on page 367 ("For it is he"). By virtue of this, it is hard to discern what exactly Bloom's thoughts are in the chapter until the narrative style switches and focuses on the familiar protagonist. However, with the knowledge that the reader has accumulated of Bloom prior to this episode it should be obvious (once the reader has come to the realization that the nameless man that Gerty is looking at is in fact Bloom) that the fantasy that Gerty constructs in this episode is inconsistent with the real circumstances of Bloom's character. Similarly, the crippled Gerty is inconsistent with the able-bodied girl that Bloom seems to have imagined her to be. The essence that Bloom apprehends of Gerty is unfounded, and the idealized fantasy he creates of her is dismantled by the mere sight of her hobbled gait as she walks away. What Joyce seems to be suggesting here is that the dissonance of Bloom's ideal of Gerty and Gerty's ideal of Bloom is indicative of those books that he parodies in the first half of the Nausicaa episode. Those books often considered "beautiful" by Joyce's contemporaries whitewash reality—by omission, exaggeration, vagueness, circumlocution, etc.—in order to create a more desirable image for their readership, though anything more than a cursory glance from the reader extinguishes any vestige of beauty through realization of this fact. The narrator purports that Gerty is constantly concerned with propriety, but is she is also familiar with the inherent sexual nature of men even though she chalks that sexuality up to a desire for "that feeling of hominess" (*U* 352). She goes to great lengths to exude an attractiveness that is based on "propriety" and Catholic morality, but the image she produces is erotic enough for Bloom to masturbate to. As I have already mentioned, the narrative concerns itself with pleasing the reader, so for Gerty the realization that Bloom has been masturbating is

evidence that he *does* find the resultant image pleasing, though after reading Bloom's stream-of-consciousness that follows it becomes apparent that it was her gartered legs that he was pleasuring himself to rather than an attractive sense of propriety. Thus her intent of exemplifying beauty that adheres to conventions of propriety and inoffensiveness produce an image perceived as pleasingly erotic by a man she is admiring, prompting him to masturbate, a result that offends that same sense of propriety.

* * *

Since my aim is to show how the dismissal of masturbatory narrative components is a means of gleaning the *substantial matter* in these works I will first explain the process of apprehending beauty (or substance) which Joyce fleshed out in *Stephen Hero, Portrait,* and *Ulysses* via Stephen Dedalus. The first term that needs to be elucidated is one that most readers of Joyce will surely be familiar with: "epiphany". What Joyce describes as an epiphany is a process that I would assert occurs frequently between any decent piece of art and its admirer. It is the process by which the intellect of the admirer picks up the components present in or suggested by a piece of art until they harmonize and resonate in a manner that reveals (or gestates in the admirer's imagination) the work's *substance*, or "true meaning" as it may be perceived. Given the subject matter that I concern myself with in this essay and because of the process I have just depicted parenthetically, I will call this process, "intellectual intercourse," except when discussing Joyce where I will defer to his coinage. Perhaps the clearest definition that Joyce ever offered of "epiphany" is in the posthumously published fragments of *Stephen Hero:* "By epiphany he meant a spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (*SH* 211). Stephen uses the Ballast Office clocktower as an example in

discourse with Cranly: “Imagine my glimpses at the clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, supreme quality of beauty” (211). Stephen then goes on to explain what he (and Thomas Aquinas) means by this “third quality”:

> --Now for the third quality. For a long time I couldn’t make out what Aquinas meant. He uses a figurative word (a very unusual thing for him) but I have solved it. *Claritas* is *quidditas*. After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognise that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.
> (213)

The process of epiphanising that Stephen expounds here is really just an Aquinist variation on what Aristotle laid out in *De Anima*. To briefly paraphrase this process that Aristotle expounded in *De Anima*: the first quality of apprehension is recognition of matter, the second quality a recognition of form, and finally a realization of the compounded state of both form and matter in a body. Aristotle describes matter as potentiality and form as actuality (Aristotle, 555). Therefore, what Joyce describes as the “third quality of beauty” is the cognitive realization of an object resonance of form and matter, wherein its full potential is *realized* (i.e. mentally *actualized* without being kinetically actualized). For example, an uninitiated person sees a bicycle only (to use an admitted utilitarian example) as “a thing”, but seeing mentally how it can be ridden, they familiarize themselves with its potential function and it becomes “epiphanized”. The object need not be seen performing

its function, but the perceiver comes to a conclusion as to its function based on its perceptual image. In "proper art" the function (which indeed has no physical manifestation according to Stephen, i.e. non-utilitarian) is to present to please the admirer with a presentation of beauty. Stephen asserts that "proper art" exists solely for the purpose of pleasing the aesthetic senses. This is evidently the intention of the opening narrative in "Nausicaa" but its efforts to please the reader are so conspicuous as to seem disingenuous and unnatural, especially once it becomes apparent that the narrative largely consists of embellishment. To put it simply, an epiphany is the "a-ha" moment when the essence (the marriage of substance and form) of an object becomes apparent. The form (in writing this is the *narrative*) is apparent, but the substance takes critical assessment to discern (except in works that possess no trace of *substance*, which, by Stephen's logic cannot be considered "proper art"). The epiphany exists, however, not in the epiphanized object but in the mind of the perceiver. However, the epiphany is not possible without stimulus from a perceived object. With art, the object is *conceived* by an artist, *perceived* by an admirer, and then epiphany takes place by discerning the harmonious order of the objects various components. In other words, the epiphany itself is incorporeal and is dependent on the individual's perception of an object. Since "beauty" is defined as the resonance between form and substance, the construction of beauty by the artist involves giving form to substance while the apprehension of beauty involves a mental deconstruction of the objects form to discern the substance from which it has been created. The Gerty-centric narrative in "Nausicaa" is excessive form and an omission of present substance. Similarly, a masturbator mentally conjures a pleasing from a perceived but embellished reality. There is no detailed description of Bloom's sexual fantasy as he looks at Gerty, but it is

nonetheless obvious that in his fantasy she did not have a "lame leg", indicating that he has embellished the present image of her.

The Stephen Dedalus that is present in *Ulysses* also ruminates on aesthetics, and conveniently the "Nausicaa" episode occurs after this has occurred. In the "Proteus" episode (which notably also takes place at Sandymount Strand) Stephen meditates on Aristotelian maxims of sensory perception (including vision most pertinently) so the reader of *Ulysses* should at least be primed in this way of thinking by the time they arrive at "Nausicaa". The opening sentence in that episode is "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes" (*U* 37). Color, Aristotle asserts in *De Anima,* is the "special object" of sight (Aristotle, 567). As Stephen's meditations in "Proteus" clarify, however, color is only perceived from the "Limits of the diaphane" (37). The diaphane is the transparent (sometimes translated as "translucent", as it is in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* used in this essay) medium through which color is perceptible, according to Aristotle. He explains, "Colour sets in movement not the sense organ but what is transparent, e.g. the air, and that, extending continuously from the object of the organ, sets the latter in movement" (Aristotle, 569). This implies that while the outer form of an object is discernible by sight the inner substance of that body cannot be perceived visually. In his annotations to *Ulysses* Gifford clarifies with a paraphrase from Aristotle's *De Sensu et Sensibili*: "…the substance of a thing perceived by the eye is not present in the form or color of the perceptual image (in contradistinction to sound and taste, which involves a "becoming" or an intermixture of substance and form, in the perceptual image). In effect, Aristotle says that the ear participates in (and thus can modify) the substance of what it hears, but the eye does not"[ix]. In other words, one can discern through visual perception

the physical shape of a thing, but its entelechy, its whatness, its "soul", etc. can only be properly and completely realized by the aforementioned method of mentally deconstructing the form from substance in order to apprehend their harmony in the present object. When one sees a physical body they only visibly perceive what is evident at the limits of the translucent and not what lies beneath those limits (i.e. the substance of said body). According to this theory, the absolute quiddity (the third aspect of epiphany) of a thing cannot become manifest by strictly visual means. It is only through the radiant harmony between the parts of a body that its quiddity—and therefore its "beauty"—can realized. The harmonic connection is what Dedalus refers to as "the rhythm of beauty" (223). The rhythm of beauty is first acknowledged in the second stage of apprehension, when an object's consonance is understood. The third aspect of beauty—the one in which the harmony of a body is fully apprehended—is incapable of being experienced visually because without perceiving the substance of a thing, the perceiver cannot adequately understand the relationship of form and matter within the body, wherein lies the final aspect of beauty. Therefore, in the "Nausicaa" episode Bloom's constant lustful gaze is not enough to apprehend the essence of Gerty, at least until her locomotion visually reveals her impaired leg. She then has descended from being an object of erotic nature to one of imperfection, but even this does not strike her essence since Bloom never becomes aware of her inner hopefulness in spite of her bleak prospects. The vision of Gerty ceases to be considered "beautiful" by the definition that Stephen gives but it was for a moment convenient as an erotic stimulus to Bloom's masturbation, which likely plays a role in his ability to navigate Nighttown later without feeling compelled to indulge himself of the prostitutes' services.

A full understanding of Stephen's aesthetic theories is important in order to fully understand the ways in which Joyce uses parody in the Nausicaa episode. When Gerty is first introduced she is described as having a "waxen pallor" to her face and, "Her hands were of finely veined alabaster" (*U* 348). "Waxen" and "alabaster" are both translucent substances and Gerty's stockings, to which Bloom pays particular attention are described as "transparent" (360). The transparency allows the stockings to give her legs a desired appearance while also showing her actual legs, while her other "insignificant [stockings] had neither shape nor form" (360). The words "alabaster" and "waxen" also allude to the art of sculpture, the type of still and motionless beauty that Gerty tries so hard to exude in this episode. There are a number of words like those mentioned above that seem to suggest Dedalus' theories, albeit in a way that seems to be merely coincidental coming from the characters present (Gerty thoughts shows no deliberate inclination towards Aristotelian philosophy) though evidently intended by Joyce. Earlier, in the "Lestrygonian" episode, Bloom contemplates the beauty of such sculptures (particularly those depicting the female form):

> His downcast eyes followed the silent veining of the oaken slab. Beauty: it curves, curves are beauty. Shapely goddesses, Venus, Juno: curves the world admires. Can see them library museum standing in the round hall, naked goddesses. Aids to digestion. They don't care what man looks. All to see. Never speaking. I mean to say to fellows like Flynn. Suppose she did Pygmalion and Galatea what would she say first? (...) Lovely forms of woman sculped Junonian. Immortal lovely.
> (176).

It is no coincidence that Gerty is beautiful as she remains *statuesquely* still on the rocks at Sandymount, but once her imperfection is revealed she is considered unattractive. The contemplation of "beauty" in this passage above from "Lestrygonians" and its relationship to "forms" are reminiscent of the previously mentioned theories from *Stephen Hero* and

Portrait, though Bloom's thoughts are not nearly as exhaustive in their logic. Particularly its allusion to shape (form, actualization) as indicative of beauty seems to be at least superficially in agreement with Stephen's theories. Moreover, Bloom's actions following this seem to be a direct example of the philosophical question Stephen poses in *Portrait:* "*Is the portrait of Mona Lisa good if I desire to see it?*" (*PA* 232). After pondering the beauty of the Venus of Praxiteles in person it becomes apparent that Bloom feels a similar desire because the next time he is is at the end of the following "Scylla and Charybdis" episode in the library museum closely inspecting the statues posterior. Bloom's thoughts exhibit a capacity to appreciate what Stephen would consider beautiful, though without the rigid theoretically-framed comprehension that the young aspiring artist displays. The irony of Bloom's mind wandering into the realms of aesthetic musings seems to be intended by Joyce no less than the irony of him masturbating while looking upon a female whose Homeric parallel, Nausicaa, is described by Odysseus as a "bloom of beauty" (*Odyssey*, VI.172) and is portrayed within the "Nausicaa" narrative as "Greekly perfect" (*U* 348). The "Nausicaa" narrative aims to artfully present a pleasant image in accordance with Stephen's theories, but those theories do not account for Bloom's masturbation (a manifestation of desire) or Gerty's impairment.

* * *

Joyce himself remarked on the indirectness of Nausicaa's narrative in a letter to Frank Budgen. In the letter Joyce describes the Nausicaa episode with a list of words, the last of which is "circumlocutions" (*Selected Letters* 246). This word is particularly apt in describing the narrative style of the episode. It is full of elaborate descriptions through which the reader is led to believing a number of conclusions, most of which are eventually

nullified. The implied evasiveness of those circumlocutory descriptions is revealed only after the reality of Gerty's condition is realized and Bloom's masturbation becomes apparent to the reader. The "beauty" of the episode *feels* real and substantial until just after Bloom's orgasm when the reality of Gerty's condition becomes evident and the sentimental prose subsequently detumesces into a less ornate stream-of-consciousness style of prose. Vladimir Nabokov noted of the episode, "Joyce manages to build up something real—pathos, pity, compassion—out of the dead formulas which he parodies"[x]. Those dead formulas seem to be from Thomas Aquinas, on whose writings much of Stephen's theories are based. In the *Summa Theologiæ* he writes, "those things that are impaired are by the very fact ugly". However, he also says, "…We see that an image is said to be beautiful, if it perfectly represents even an ugly thing" (Aquinas, I q.39 a.8). By this logic Gerty can never be "beautiful" but an artist could make a "beautiful" representation by virtue of its accurate portrayal of her ugliness. Joyce usually chooses to show his readers their ugliness as a means of critically assessing the conduct and beliefs of the people that occupy the world he lives in. Gerty's narrative as it pertains to Bloom is clearly embellished, and it is more than likely that the details that pertain to her beauty are likely embellished too, but it would be cruel to call her ugly due to a physical defect that she can do nothing to fix.

One of the most striking features of the "Nausicaa" episode is its accessibility. Its simplicity of form implies a lack of guile which betrays the narrative's vagueness. It must be emphasized, however, that the word "accessibility" is not synonymous with "clarity". The distinction is especially significant when we consider that to understand the essence of something (its quiddity) is for that thing to become clear to the perceiver (*claritas* is *quidditas*). The episode reads much like any familiar romance novel—to be sure, Gifford

points out that Gerty is also the name of the protagonist of Maria Cummins' novel *The Lamplighter* and the first half of the "Nausicaa" episode is stylistically a parody of that novel[xi]. Given the episode's context amongst *Ulysses'* other perplexing episodes, the "Nausicaa" episode is a comfortable of *Ulysses* who found the rest of the novel impenetrable. In the "Nausicaa" episode Joyce seems to be making a criticism of those literary works that purport to be "beautiful" yet lack some of the fundamental qualities required to be considered such according to Stephen's theories—albeit theories that are also subjected to "Nausicaa"'s parody. There is another quote from Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiæ* that Dedalus never brings up, though it lies nested in the passages that make up the source of Dedalus' theories in *Portrait* and *Stephen Hero.* "…We see that an image is said to be beautiful, if it perfectly represents even an ugly thing" (Aquinas, I q.39 a.8). This is the most notable deviation from young Dedalus' aesthetic doctrine in the first half of the Nausicaa episode. That first half of the episode is easier to read than the greater part of the novel, but is deliberately vague in its portrayal of reality. It is, as has already been noted, circumlocutory and even factually omissive. It does not strive to portray or arrive at any concrete truths as indicated by Gerty's fixation on the building of an elaborate fantasy that lacks substance.

The works from which "Nausicaa" derives its parodic style were wildly popular during the time that Joyce was writing[xii], and both of *Ulysses'* female characters that enjoy the spotlight of narration are examples of characters that read such novels: Molly Bloom seems to have enjoyed Paul de Kock's book enough to request Bloom get her another of his, and Gerty enjoys Cummins' *The Lamplighter* novel and the "beauty of poetry, so sad in its transient loveliness" (*U* 364). "Transient loveliness", as Gerty calls it, becomes a common

theme in the episode and in examples of masturbation in other twentieth-century novels as well. In Nabokov's *Lolita* Humbert Humbert refers to masturbation as a "race against nature" which has a little less urgency than a masturbating Alex Portnoy with his mother banging on the bathroom door telling him not to flush so that she can inspect his *implied* stool. In *Ulysses,* however, Gerty is referring to the aesthetic effect of poetry that she enjoys reading but the idea that "everything fades" figures into Bloom's part of the narrative as well. As he is trying to write a message on the beach—"I. AM. A"—he reflects, "Hopeless sand. Nothing grows in it. All fades" (381). The transience of everything seems to be one of the only consistencies between the narratives even as Gerty sees it from vantage of boundless hope, Bloom's hope has since faded into memories. These thoughts are simultaneously defeatist in tone but correct with regards to Stephen's theories. Stephen has presented such a lofty definition of "beauty" that even after secularizing Aquinas' aesthetic theories he does not arrive at an ideal that is attainable. It remains just that: an *ideal*, and an abstract one at that. The best a novelist can do in aspiring to Stephen's ideal is to simulate "beauty" as he defines it in a manner that allows the reader to conjure a pleasing image from it. Pleasure can be arrived by one of two means: a masturbatory approach, where the reader treats the novel uncritically as though it were pornography and merely accepts the narrative as it is present, or by way of "intellectual intercourse", where the reader takes a critical approach to apprehending the text which involves a *disillusioning* of false material to arrive at the substantial material that remains after scrutiny. Usually this occurs in first person narratives (as it does in *Lolita* and *Portnoy's Complaint*), but Gerty's narrative is written in third-person. The narrative, nonetheless, displays an exceptional amount of favor for Gerty and there are bounds to the praise that it

lavishes upon her: The narrator lavishes praise upon Gerty freely: "She was pronounced beautiful by all who knew her…" (348); "...she looked so lovely in her sweet girlish shyness that of a surety God's fair land of Ireland did not hold her equal" (349); "If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man's passionate gaze it was there plain to be seen on that man's face. It is for you, Gertrude MacDowell, and you know it" (361-2). The narrative's praises Gerty so freely that it seems as though she is narrating the episode herself.

If there is a part of the episode that comes across as especially aesthetically elevated it is—coincidentally—the moment at which Bloom has an orgasm. In his lecture notes on *Ulysses* Vladimir Nabokov writes that this passage is "really tender and beautiful: it is the freshness of poetry still with us before it becomes a cliché"[xiii]. The depiction is one that is so full of bliss that it stands out in the context of the otherwise cliché style. Reading the "O"s that are strewn about the passage sounds precisely like the fanfare of a crowd after each firework in a display bursts and crackles in the sky:

> And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! they were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lively! O so soft, sweet, soft! (*U* 367)

To this point in the episode Bloom is still not named (though the astute reader will have identified him) and what he is doing is still just as unclear. On first reading the orgasm passage can come and go, only detected as such by the most perceptive of readers. In the following lines the narrator is expresses frustration with Bloom's lack of decency (now identified), calling him a "brute" and an "utter cad". The uninitiated reader, not yet privy to Bloom's masturbation, will find this unforeseen admonishment baffling. Joyce has craftily implicated the reader in Bloom's masturbation by making the passage so beautiful that its

delights are concurrent with Bloom's orgasm. Joyce is using self-reviling thoughts of Bloom to indirectly shame the reader for their indulgence in what was considered an inherently anti-aesthetic action. The criticisms weighed against Bloom can also be placed upon the reader that has found this "lewd" passage aesthetically pleasing. The "aesthetic" pleasure that the reader has experienced a few moments prior while perusing the fireworks passage is now debased upon the realization that Bloom has been masturbating all the while, suggesting the presence of pornographic stimulus. This tumescence and subsequent detumescence[xiv] simultaneously occurs in a sexual capacity in Bloom and in an aesthetic capacity in the reader. It seems that in this passage Joyce is conflating contemporary definitions of "pornography" and "beauty".

Bloom cites an example of contemporary pornography in his post-masturbatory musings: "A dream of wellfilled hose. Where was that? Ah, yes. Mutoscope pictures in Capel Street: for men only. Peeping Tom. Willy's hat and what the girls did with it. Do they snapshot those girls or is it all a fake?" (*U* 368) Katherine Mullin[xv] has noted that the first half of the episode reads almost as a parody of a mutoscope film. Mutoscopes were machines that played short motion pictures through a single lens. A large amount of mutoscope reels were created with pornographic intent, such as the titles that Bloom lists. Describing the reels as "pornographic" today, however, would be a misleading representation. Looking online for examples of these reels you can occasionally find some that depict fully nude women, but that seems to be a rarity. Of the reels that Bloom names, the existence reels entitled "Peeping Tom" and "What the Girls Did to Willie's Hat" can be verified[xvi], but "A Dream of Wellfilled Hose" appears to be either Joyce or Bloom's invention. It is perhaps an apt title to give Bloom's view of Gerty's gartered legs.

To classify something as pornographic today it is perhaps easiest to borrow a quote from Justice Potter Stewart: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [hard-core pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it."[xvii] This class of pornography is so apparent in its nature as to need no definition other than "you will know it when you see it". Mutoscopes do not necessarily belong to this class of "pornography" (even those that are clearly intended to be pornographic), but neither does the first half of the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*. All the same, they can both be classified as "improper art" under Stephen's aesthetic theories because it excites a "kinetic emotion" in the form of sexual desire in Bloom (*PA* 222). In the Paris notebooks Joyce writes, "An improper art aims at exciting in the way of comedy the feeling of desire but the feeling which is proper to comic art is the feeling of joy" (JW 102). This is to say that improper art incites in its audience a desire for joy, in fact drawing attention to the absence of said joy, whereas proper art contains the elements required in itself to incite joy in the reader. In the first half of the Nausicaa episode Gerty only seems to express displeasure with the unladylike conduct of Cissy and Edy, while formulating an unrealistic fantasy, the very basis of which is a desire for something insubstantial by virtue of it being unattainable.

The most fragile part of Stephen's theories—and where I would argue that "Nausicaa" totally obliterates them—is that he accounts for their deficiencies by deeming those people with a disposition towards "kinetic emotion" as "abnormal". Lynch uses himself as an example and poses a question to Stephen in *Portrait* that seems rhetorically potent enough to dismantle his theories: " —You say that art must not excite desire, said

Lynch. I told you that one day I wrote my name in pencil on the backside of the Venus of Praxiteles in the Museum. Was that not desire?" (*PA* 222). Stephen's rebuttal is relatively thoughtless and rather than defending his theory with logic chooses to defend it by playfully belittling Lynch's character: "—I speak of normal natures, said Stephen. You also told me that one day that when you were a boy in that charming carmelite school you ate pieces of dried cowdung" (222). He defines beauty quite thoroughly, even if his definition is quite lofty, but he never defines a "normal nature" even though these are supposedly the only people that can truly apprehend beauty in art. What he describes as normal is not normal at all; it is another ideal. He backtracks shortly after by admitting that, "we are all animals. I also am an animal," (223) but he only makes this admission after Lynch has gone from laughing, to "humbled", to "poignant and selfembittered" (223). It seems the including himself amongst the other "animal abnormal natures" is a disingenuous attempt to comfort his friend who he has just "humbled". Stephen arrogantly asserts a superiority over everybody with his pedantic understanding of aesthetics. His theories are so abstract in their idealization of beauty (not to mention their idealization of normalcy) that it is almost unfathomable that anybody has ever apprehended artistic beauty in the manner that he explains—including himself. Lynch, however, is the only friend Stephen have that is decent enough to indulge him in aesthetic discourse and here he has just insulted his character in response to a question, which I must reaffirm, is *a thoroughly good one*.

This passage from *Portrait* is significant because Bloom is also abnormal. In Dublin he is as abnormal as you can get. Similarly Joyce's Dubliners are so insistent on homogeneity that when Bloom makes efforts to assimilate and behave "normally" he is perceived by others as abnormal and forced into the role of an outsider. For example, in the

"Cyclops" episode when asked which nation he is from Bloom responds with sound logic, "I was born here. Ireland" (*U* 331). Bloom having cited a desire to not engage in violent battles with the British just before is presumably being cornered by the Citizen and his cronies into answering this question by saying he is from "The British Empire", but when that fails they prod him into admitting that he is Jewish, effectively casting him as an outsider to their anti-Semitic "nationalist" circle. His abnormality also manifests itself in a way quite similar to the way Lynch describes in *Portrait*. At the end of the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode he is seen in the National Library Museum inspecting the backside of the Venus of Praxiteles, though not vandalizing it as Lynch had. His masturbation is another manifestation of an "abnormal" reaction to beauty. These abnormalities, however, contribute to a new example of "beauty"—Bloom as depicted in *Ulysses*—rather than a long-winded and unachievable aesthetic ideal.

After the narrative that glows upon Gerty has plummeted into Bloom's blunt prose, the strongest image that remains of her is the first time she walks in the episode, revealing her crippled leg. The affliction, unfortunately, renders her as "ugly" by Stephen Dedalus' definition (which I would argue is not as bad or uncommon as it sounds) more than likely to a few of the Dubliners in *Ulysses*. It is a cruel treatment, but I would argue that her beauty is quite similar Bloom's example of "abnormal beauty", Gerty becomes, even with so little known about her, a radiant example of wholesome human spirit. Rather than mawkish her hopes begin to seem "resilient". The narrative neglects her crippled leg, but there should be no doubt that she is well aware of her condition. As the cruelty of the Citizen and company in the "Cyclops" episode will attest to, there are plenty of people in Joyce's Dublin to point out her abnormalities lest she forget them. Her petty frustrations

with the impropriety of her friends is forgivable and her sentimentality becomes something to be admired rather than pitied because as she walks away from Bloom she does it with "quiet dignity" (367). Once the masturbatory gloss of the episode's narrative begins to wear off in the subsequent detumescence it seems like there is little left of Gerty, but the details that are left depict a flawed but resilient girl; a very pleasing image that will endure through repeat readings of the episode.

"A Photographic Image Rippling Upon a Screen": Humbert's Pursuit of a 'Solipsized' Lolita

"I would crowd all the demons of my desire against the railing of a throbbing balcony: it would be ready to take off in the apricot and black humid evening—whereupon the lighted image would move and Eve would revert to a rib, and there would be nothing in the window but an obese partly clad man reading the paper.

Since I sometimes won the race between my fancy and nature's reality, the deception was bearable. Unbearable pain began when chance entered the fray and deprived me of the smile meant for me."

-Lolita: Nabokov, 264.

In the forward to *Lolita* John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. (a fictitious individual of Nabokov's making) discusses the nature of the book's composition, the affliction of its writer (though without any definitive diagnosis), and defends the presence of certain passages that might be considered "obscene", "aphrodisiac" or "pornographic". He makes a particularly compelling argument in defense of those unspecified passages in *Lolita*:

> *Viewed simply as a novel, "Lolita" deals with situations and emotions that would remain exasperatingly vague to the reader had their expression been etiolated by means of platitudinous evasions. True, not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work; indeed, the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions into accepting without qualms a lavish array of four-letter words in a banal novel, will be quite shocked by their absence here. If, however, for this paradoxical prude's comfort, an editor attempted to dilute or omit scenes that a certain type of mind might call "aphrodisiac" (see in this respect the monumental decision rendered December 6, 1933, by Hon. John M. Woolsey in regard to another, considerably more outspoken, book), one would have to forego the publication of "Lolita" altogether, since those very scenes that one might ineptly accuse of a sensuous existence of their own, are the most strictly functional ones in the development of a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis.*

Having already dealt with the aforemenitoned "outspoken book" in my previous chapter, in this chapter I aim to illuminate the function of masturbation in the plot structure of *Lolita.*

In *Lolita* Humbert tries to supplant the real living Lolita with a fanciful Lolita that he has mentally fabricated. The fanciful Lolita is "solipsized" in a passage depicting Humbert

masturbating in the Haze family room while Charlotte Haze is out of the house. After having pleasured himself to completion Humbert leaves that particular scene feeling "proud of [him]self" (62) though the scene itself is perhaps the most explicitly pornographic account in the entire novel. Lolita, however, seems to be unaware of Humbert's lusty gaze (or at least Humbert would have the reader believe this to be true). Later, during the novel's climax—when Humbert murders Clare Quilty—the setting is furnished with images from this early scene. The climactic chapter plays out as a bizarre variation on the scene from the Haze Family room. The items of note largely go unnoticed or at most induce mild déjà vu for the somewhat drunk Humbert. In the same fashion that Humbert had tried to supplant the real Lolita with a false/fanciful version of her, Nabokov has supplanted the familiar Humbert (the nympholept) prior to masturbating in the Haze family room—played in this scene by Quilty in Humbert's robes—with a new morally improved Humbert. Quilty had been attempting to portray Lolita in pornographic films while she was staying with him at Duk Duk Ranch, however, arguably the most pornographic passage of the novel occurs when Humbert secretly ogled Lolita in the Haze family room while he masturbated describing it as if she were "a photographic image rippling upon a screen" (62). It is, at least, the only detailed account that leads up to Humbert enjoying "the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known" (61). Since Humbert has recounted in full detail these remarks in the novel it could be said that he has, in a bizarre way, cast Lolita in his own work of pornography. Therefore, murdering Clare Quilty while he is wearing the purple robe that Humbert donned during the "davenport scene" (as he affectionately refers to it on page 62) is a "poetic" way of concluding this novel by virtue of some karmic order (based on the whims of McFate, Nabokov, etc.). The final chapter where Humbert drives off

in utter resignation hangs off the end of the novel like an appendage that may have been superfluous had Humbert's "moral apotheosis" not so fittingly epitomized his triumph over Quilty—whoever he may be in "reality". The murder of Quilty is quite tactfully written by Nabokov as to display the superficiality of Humbert's lust-driven love for Lolita, since in the murder Humbert is playing the part of Lolita from earlier in the book, implying that the "solipsized" Lolita that Humbert had enjoyed had only ever been a figment of his imagination, the spectral image of his diseased childhood love, Annabel, projected onto another beautiful young girl.

Early in the account of his life with Lolita Humbert abruptly turns to the audience to place a request upon them to "participate in the scene I am about to replay" (57). The request to the reader attempts to preemptively display the caution that Humbert had exercised and to show "how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event was" (57). The chapter begins by depicting Lolita and Humbert in a playful tussle over an apple that sees Humbert's pulse fluctuate: "My heart beat like a drum as she sat down…" and just a moment later, "…my heart was like snow under thin crimson skin" (58). It is easy to see the excitement mounting within Humbert at this point. It is only after the "impudent child extended her legs across [his] lap," however, that Humbert is in "a state of excitement bordering on insanity" (58). It is at this time that he is able to "attune, by a series of stealthy movements, [his] masked lust to her guileless limbs" (58). Humbert then sings Lolita's favorite "Little Carmen" song to her, "repeating the automatic stuff and holding her under its spell" (59). Humbert's description of the event makes the claim that Lolita was not aware that Humbert was masturbating because she was "under a spell" though the deliberate force that he uses is downplayed. The power of the spell to control Lolita is

belied, however, in minor details and parenthetical asides. "'Oh it's nothing at all,' she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away" (61). At this point Humbert has begun massaging a "yellow-ish violet bruise on her lovely nymphet thigh" (60). It is at this point that Humbert "crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known" (61). He then writes "Immediately afterwards (as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased) she rolled off the sofa…" (61). The parenthetical portion of the quote acknowledges that what had just transpired was most likely, in fact, a struggle. This would mean that Humbert has forcibly fondled Lolita in his lap, her apprehensiveness evident in the term "half-turned away". In other words, the control that Humbert had claimed to use as a means of ensuring the innocence of the event was in fact imposed upon Lolita. A testimony from Lolita might clarify the validity of some of Humbert's claims in this chapter, but alas, Humbert's most significant amount of control is over the narrative. As Nomi Tamir-Ghez has noted, "Not only is Lolita's voice almost silenced, her point of view, the way she sees the situation and feels about it, is rarely mentioned and can be only surmised by the reader"[xviii]. Without a statement from Lolita present the reader is left with only Humbert's story. It just so happens that embedded within Humbert's Lolita there resides a seemingly more substantial Dolores Haze (though admittedly still fictitious) that eludes the reader, present only in small glimpses, obscured by the narration of the imposing Humbert.

Nonetheless, the falsely idealized Lolita that Humbert longs for warrants further explanation. As orgasm is ostensibly imminent ("What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle…") he explains, "Lolita had been safely

solipsized" (60). The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition for "solipsism": "the view or theory that self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing really existent". This definition makes it rather difficult to pin down what exactly Nabokov/Humbert meant by "solipsized". The agent of the verb is presumably Humbert, making Lolita the direct object. Since the theory of solipsism refers to the self, however, it is difficult to understand what it means for the separate entity, Lolita, to be solipsized by Humbert. Fortunately Nabokov translated *Lolita* into Russian and the literary scholar Harold Bloom has translated this line from that version back into English as "Lolita's reality was successfully cancelled"[xix]. The validity of such approaches is somewhat dubious due to translation's palimpsestic nature, however, Bloom's re-translation via Nabokov's translation fits quite nicely with the way in which the novel unfolds. Late in the book Humbert laments, "all *that* I cancelled and cursed" (278).

In the preceding chapters Humbert begins his apparent mission of exhibiting to the reader his love for Lolita. *Lolita's* opening chapter is a brief yet playful and charming ode to Lolita. Only by way of divulging that he is a murderer and addressing a jury does it take on a sinister tone. His love for Lolita *feels* genuine, but her age makes her unattainable, by virtue of legal implications as well being a violation of a social taboo. Forbidden love is a theme ubiquitous in romantic literature. Regardless of legal wrongdoing his most significant transgression is the betrayal his beloved Lolita. He claims to have such a deep love for Lolita, and to be sure he has gone through great lengths to capture her beauty by writing this lengthy account, but when he masturbates to the image of her he reveals a desire not to partake of lovemaking with Lolita but rather to take it from her. Even consensual sex with Lolita would legally be considered statutory rape, but as he puts it he

was “above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution” (60). The desire to drug and rape her, nonetheless, betrays the love that he claims to have for Lolita, and that desire takes shape when he masturbates in the Haze family room.

When Humbert recounts the episode of his masturbation he is adamant that he did nothing to Lolita. In the following chapter he clarifies this notion by stating, “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (62). His reason for stating this seems to be to morally vindicate himself, but it also has an adverse effect; he admits that what he had toyed with in his lap and lustfully looked upon was not Lolita, but the fact remains that *there was* a real Lolita present. Furthermore, the real Lolita possesses all of the things that Humbert has deprived her of in his fantasy; she has a will and a consciousness, and she is most certainly a living human being. At this point in the text it becomes clear that there are two versions of Lolita present: the “solipsized” Lolita present in Humbert’s fantasy that possesses no qualities of life, and the real living, volitional Lolita. After Charlotte has died and they show him the body Humbert says “…her eyes intact, their black lashes still wet, matted, like yours, Lolita” (105). This places emphasis on the idea that Humbert’s “solipsized” version of Lolita is nothing more than a beautiful corpse, and that the process of “solipsizing” her has essentially *killed* her.

The sexual fantasies that accompany masturbation are crafted with the sole objective of reaching orgasm. As such, these sexual fantasies are constructed in the mind of masturbator, often with a disregard for the wants, needs, and feelings of the object of their lust. In narrative form this leads to a one-dimensional rendering of the fetishized character.

In the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* prior to Bloom's orgasm Gerty is sentimental without bounds and frequently naïve. The portion of the narrative that focuses on Gerty lacks dimension, but upon realizing that she is lame-legged and that Bloom has been masturbating her character is given some dimension and where the reader once had hope for her there is now pity for her. *Lolita* is different from this episode of *Ulysses* because the novel has only a singular narrator (excluding Dr. John Ray Jr. and Nabokov's afterword). From the beginning, the odds of a favorable portrayal of Lolita are sparse due to her lack of voice in the novel. Loving prose of the first chapter aside, the sexual attraction that Humbert feels for Lolita can only be described as predatory. The first sexual satisfaction he relishes from her is taken without her knowing it. He never intends for her to be a sexual agent, even as he fantasizes about having a "normal" relationship with her. Instead he tries to "steal the honey of a spasm" (62) time and again: first, in the Haze family room with Lo across his lap, and later in the Enchanted Hunters with her unconscious. Following masturbating in the Haze family room, Humbert clarifies that the Lolita he "possessed" had "no will" or "consciousness" (62). Lolita, however, manages to shake free of Humbert's restrictive epithets by awakening from her "solipsized" state in the Enchanted Hunters where, to Humbert's surprise, she partakes of consensual sex with him. Prior to that event, Lolita is portrayed in a manner that seems childish, naïve, stubborn, and even charming. That is to say, she is a typical child. When she awakens from her drug-induced sleep to have consensual sex with Humbert she takes control of her own will and also becomes aware of Humbert's sexual obsession with her. Thus, the conscious-less, will-less, fantasized version of Lolita is proven false by the existence of this real, living, sexually experienced Lolita.

Humbert's sexual attraction to nymphets is troublesome, even in a practical manner, because it largely hinges on their innocence. Innocence in this sense carries two meanings: to not have acted "sinfully", and furthermore, to have no knowledge of sin. In other words, even awareness of the transgressions of another can morally corrupt someone. This is why Humbert argues so adamantly that Lolita was unaware when he masturbated. He claims unequivocally, "The child knew nothing" (62). What makes Humbert's fetish significant is that most people raise their children in a manner that ensures their innocence, at least until they are of an age when they possess good judgement. This means that every decent parent is unknowingly raising their children to meet the sexual preference of Humbert Humbert. However, innocence is something virtually everybody values, especially in children. The problem is that where the average person sees something charming in a child at play, Humbert sees something erotic. Just as Bloom's masturbation in the Nausicaa episode is rather idiosyncratic, so too is Humbert's sexual longing for Lolita. Both individuals experience abnormal sexual impulses to things that most people might consider beautiful or pleasing.

* * *

If the nature of Humbert's attraction first becomes evident in his recounting the "davenport scene" then it is in the Enchanted Hunters that Lolita first manages to irrevocably defy that Humbert's fantastic ideal. With some sleeping pills he acquired from Dr. Byron earlier (94) at his disposal he aims to drug Lolita, and rape her while she is unconscious. He makes clear his reasons for having her unconscious, saying "I was still

firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude" (124). The drugged Lolita at this point begins to resemble the will-less, conscious-less Lolita of Humbert's masturbatory fantasy. The literal lock-and-key under which Humbert keeps Lolita in this chapter becomes a symbol of how the child is handled in his fantasy: "This, then, was the hermetic vision of her which I had locked in—after satisfying myself that the door carried no inside bolt" (123). When he returns to the room she would be "emprisoned in her crystal sleep" (123). Humbert's plot to sexually indulge of Lolita is simply a selfish attempt to actualize the chimeric fantasy that aided his masturbation in the Haze family room.

It is at the Enchanted Hunters, however, that Lolita begins to deviate from the fantastic mold that Humbert has tried to shape her too. It is not through an awareness or flight from Humbert's veiled sexual advances that Lolita defies his fantasy, but rather by awakening from her drug-induced slumber to consensually partake of sexual intercourse with him. In the beginning of the chapter in which they have sex Humbert again addresses the reader:

> Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let's even smile a little.
> (129)

In his preamble to the passage in which he masturbates Humbert argues that he did nothing wrong. Here, on the other hand, he is attempting to argue his innocence once again, but he portrays Lolita as the agent of lust. Formerly, Humbert had aggrandized himself when portraying his masturbating likeness: he was a "robust turk…in full consciousness of his freedom" (60). In this later passage he is a "trembling doe". Since, once again, this

passage precedes the account which it refers to, the reader is only really aware that whatever events follow warrant an explanation from Humbert. The tone of this passage, however, reveals a marked departure from the previously quasi-omnipotent Humbert.

Humbert's meekness on the morning of his tryst with Lolita becomes most evident in the moments just before she awakes. He voices a number of doubts and suspicions about how she may react: "Would she be shocked at finding me by her side, and not in some spare bed? Would she collect her clothes and lock herself up in the bathroom? Would she demand to be taken back at once to Ramsdale—to her mother's bedside—back to camp?" (132). If Lolita were to have had any of those reactions it would have been perfectly reasonable and his acknowledgement of them shows a seemingly abrupt awareness of reality and consequence. Humbert imagines Lolita reacting this way should she become aware of his motives because it is in keeping with outward innocents of nymphets. Still, Lolita is not a typical nymphet by Humbert's standard, nor does she fit the mold of a "normal" child (Miss Pratt of the Beardsley School points this out to Humbert on page 196). It is in this moment that Humbert for the first time becomes aware of that fact.

After Humbert has voiced his concern over the awakening Lolita has subsided he becomes aware of a number of other details about the young girl:

> Her kiss, to my delirious embarrassment, had some rather comical refinements of flutter and probe which made me conclude she had been coached at an early age by a little Lesbian. No Charlie boy could have taught her that…she put her mouth to my ear—but for quite a while my mind could not separate into words the hot thunder of her whisper…I realized what she was suggesting. I answered I did not know what game she and Charlie had played.
> (133)

Humbert's newly acquired knowledge that Lolita is sexually experienced at first only leads him to "delirious embarrassment" perhaps because he felt foolish for previously being so

reserved in his sexual advances. He even feels once more like he did in his mid-masturbatory euphoria, that he was in "a dream world, where everything was permissible" (133). With Lolita now as an active agent in the scene, however, this becomes more complicated. Lolita responds to Humbert's caresses with a sharp exclamation, "Lay off, will you", calling his displays of affection "'romantic slosh' or 'abnormal'" (133). Resistance to Humbert's advances is not unprecedented; she had "half-turned away" and struggled to free herself from him when he was masturbating earlier. "Cut it out," however, is an unequivocal rejection of physical advance, whereas earlier she had just bashfully shouted "Oh it's nothing at all" while Humbert had groped at her. Furthermore, Lolita's behavior in the sexual engagement at the Enchanted Hunters seems to have altered his opinion of her somewhat, even if only slightly at first.

Humbert omits Lolita's lecture on sexual matters and instead writes, "I shall not bore my reader with a detailed account of Lolita's presumption. Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had so utterly depraved" (133). There is a trace of disappointment in the concluding paragraph of this chapter, especially in contrast with the triumph Humbert feels earlier in the novel after masturbating in close proximity to Lolita. Awareness of Lolita's sexual experience has ruined the image that Humbert had previously possessed of her as an untainted innocent youth.

It is at the Enchanted Hunters hotel that the dynamic between Lolita and Humbert shifts drastically. In the Haze family room, Humbert felt utterly infallible and in full control, whereas when he makes love to Lolita he explains, "My life was handled by little Lolita in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me"

(133-4). When Humbert was masturbating in the Haze household he says that he has "solipsized" Lolita. I have already made note of how this Nabokov-coined term, while appearing relatively simple, is rather complicated to fully comprehend. While that may be so, what is clearer than the implied definition of the term is that Humbert feels that Lolita has done the same thing to him here. His life has become an "insensate gadget" for Lolita to toy around with. Humbert had previously held a position of dominance in his relationship with Lolita, but he now finds himself in a dubious situation where there is now a living witness to his crime and his preconceptions of the young girl have, in reality, been proven false.

* * *

As he is sitting in silence with Dick Schiller, Humbert begins to muse on murdering Quilty who he has just learned (or at least thinks) was the man who had "kidnapped" Lolita: "I could very well do with a little rest in this subdued, frightened-to-death rocking chair, before I drove to wherever the beast's lair was—and then pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger" (274). The first shot that Humbert fires in Pavor Manor also hits a rocking chair similar to this one.

Something is *strange* about the way Lolita tells Humbert that Quilty was the one who kidnapped her. She begins, "'Do you really want to know who it was? Well, it was—' And softly, confidentially, arching her thing eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, she emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago" (272). Firstly, there is no direct quote where Lolita says the name. This is already suspicious. Secondly, there are a dramatic amount of descriptive terms that illustrate the way she says a simple name. This

should raise a few more flags. Most significantly, however, is the implied name which Humbert hears: "Clare Quilty". That name however is phonetically proximate to the phrase spoken in Humbert's native idiom, "clair qu'il t'y" or "clearly you there". In a letter that Lolita receives from Mona Dahl earlier in the novel she mentions that the Poet in the Enchanted Hunters play that Lolita had been acting in, "stumbled in Scene III when arriving at the bit of French nonsense. Remember? *Ne manque pas de à ton amant, Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu'il t'y mène.* Lucky beau! *Qu'il t'y*—What a tongue-twister!" (223). This is perhaps one of those "dazzling coincidences that logicians hate and poets love" (31). Logically the coincident could not have been set up by Quilty because there is no way that he could anticipate Humbert mistaking Lolita's French accusation for his name. Furthermore, when Humbert asks Dolly Schiller to elaborate on the things that Quilty had made her do she answers with a simple gesture:

When Humbert finally arrives at Pavor Manor with Chum, "Full blued. Aching to be discharged" (292) the earlier scene in which he had masturbated seems like a distant memory of little consequence. However, Nabokov carefully evokes subtle images of that scene when Humbert arrives to kill Quilty. Throughout the novel Nabokov uses certain props or images as means of connecting two scenes. Nabokov's dislike for symbols is well-documented ("…everybody should know that I deplore symbols and allegory…" 314), but this does not mean that he does not establish symbols of his own making. In *Lolita* it seems that Nabokov has created a large inventory of seemingly mundane objects and placed them strategically in one scene, developing connotations associated with that scene, and then casually places them in a later scene to invoke greater depth to the scene. For example, when Humbert arrives at Quilty's house with the intention of killing him he remarks that

Quiilty is donning a "purple bathrobe, very like one I had" (294). At first Nabokov's sartorial decision to have Quilty wearing this robe seems insignificant, but it is brought up a number of times over the course of the chapter ("To wander with a hundred eyes over his purple silks…" 295, "my purple target" 302, "a burst of royal purple where his ear had been" 304, etc.). After Humbert has delivered the coup de grace, the last image we see of Quilty is him, "crawl[ing] out onto the landing…then subsiding, forever this time, in a purple heap" (305). The doppelganger theme has already been thoroughly developed by this point in the novel, so comparisons between Humbert and Quilty are easily made. What is most notable, however, is that Humbert only dons the aforementioned purple robe once in the novel, and that is back in chapter thirteen of part one, when he masturbates in the Haze family room. In that chapter he writes, "I now wiped off the soap, perfumed my hair and armpit, slipped on a purple silk dressing gown, and, humming nervously went down the stairs in quest of Lo" (57). At the time of reading that passage, the purple robe seems wildly insignificant, but a further examination of common narrative décor between the two chapters illuminates Nabokov's intent to bring these two scenes together in the readers mind.

After entering Pavor Manor with the intention of killing Quilty he takes to locking the various rooms of the house "to prevent his playmate from locking himself up in a room" (294). The image one gets is similar to that of Lolita figuratively locked up in a "solipsized" state or literally locked up in a room at the Enchanted Hunters. Humbert remarks, "The house, being an old one, had more planned privacy than have modern glamour-boxes, where the bathroom, the only lockable locus, has to be used for the furtive needs of

planned parenthood" (294). "Planned parenthood" here refers to masturbation, an allusion to the interplay between this scene and the one in which Humbert masturbates.

While Humbert is locking the bathrooms Quilty emerges, "in a purple robe, very like one I had" (294). The boundaries of Quilty and Humbert's respective identities become somewhat cloudy as the chapter progresses. Humbert proposes Quilty "read his own sentence—in the poetical form I had given it. The term "poetical justice" is one that may be most happily used in this respect." (299). The poem by itself is nothing exceptional, but the "poetical justice" of his poem is mitigated by Quilty's mocking commentary ("That's good, you know. That's damned good."; "Getting smutty, eh?" 299-300). Nonetheless, having Quilty read aloud poem that was written in the first-person by Humbert further obfuscates the boundaries of their individual identities.

The confusion of identities is played up when Humbert is describing a tussle he had with Quilty: "We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (299). This description is brilliantly crafted here, but earlier in the novel Humbert had failed to describe a similar visual: "…with the monkeyish nimbleness that was so typical of that American nymphet, she snatched out of my abstract grip the magazine I had opened (pity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves)"(58). The image as it takes place in Pavor Manor vividly describes a fight without ascribing any of the blows to one participant or the other. Humbert cites, "the obligatory scene in the Westerns" though without the "ox-stunnning fisticuffs, the flying furniture" (299). The giant mass of limbs seemingly swinging at their owner's body gives

an image of self-abuse, an epithet commonly used by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice to describe masturbation.[xx]

Eventually Humbert finally hits his target with some regularity. Over the course of a paragraph the perceived effect of the bullets changes somewhat drastically: "…I fired three or four times in quick succession, wounding him at every blaze; and every time I did it to him, that horrible thing to him, his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain… 'This is abominable, you really should not—' His voice trailed off as he reached the landing, but he steadily walked on despite all the lead I had lodged in his bloated body—and in distress, in dismay, I understood that far from killing him I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced" (303). Humbert has noticed the almost orgasmic effect his bullets are having on Quilty.

As Quilty has just about expired, Humbert comes to and has a disorienting realization: "I held one of his slippers instead of the pistol—I was sitting on the pistol" (304). On its own the image is funny in a way that is consistent with the morbid humor of entire chapter, but there is more at play here than a confused man with a pistol up his ass. Remember that Humbert's masturbation had concluded with him, "crush[ing] out against [Lolita's] left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known" (61). Lolita also jumps to answer the telephone, and while talking to her mother "she kept tapping the edge of the table with the slipper she held in her hand" (61). Now, through Nabokov's tactical placement of props is a suggestion that the solipsized Lolita was only ever a manifestation of Humbert's fancy, which is to say she was Humbert by virtue of being imagined by him.

To drive the point home I will also point out another coincidence in the bizarre nomenclature of Quilty's house: Pavor Manor. "Pavor" in Latin means "fear", however, "Fear Manor" hardly feels like an appropriate name for the house since murdering Quilty is the *second* most deliberated things that Humbert does in the entire book—even if he almost botches the job (which only makes it more entertaining anyway). There is, however, a simple anagrammatic modification (a device Nabokov has already used to disguise himself as "Vivian Darkbloom) that changes the name to Vapor Manor. The name "Vapor Manor" is synonymous to "Haze House". The former is the locale for Humbert's murder of Quilty and the latter the locale where Humbert masturbates with the solipsized Lolita.

As Humbert leaves Pavor Manor he muses, "This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Clare Quilty" (305). Earlier in the novel, just after Humbert has implored his audience to participate in his masturbatory scene he presents it as though he were staging a play himself: "Main Character: Humber the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks…" (57). The chapter that follows deviates from this dramatic format, but it seems fitting to look at this chapter as a play that Humbert has staged for Lolita for the sake of the connection with Quilty's murder. This "play" for Lolita is more pornographic than any other passage in the book (see "perfunctory underthings", "hot hollow of her groin", "left buttock", etc. 61) but Humbert has cast Lolita as its object of beauty without her knowledge. On the other hand, Quilty had asked Lolita to be in his own pornographic films, but she had stated "I'm not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys, because I want only you. Well he kicked me out" (277). Despite kicking her

out of Duk Duk Ranch we can at least infer that Quilty did not force Lolita to partake of such activities. On the other hand, despite Humbert being the only narrator and tailoring certain passages, the reader can still surmise that Humbert has been using force with Lolita ("…as if we had been struggling…" 61). Humbert has a way of silencing Lolita throughout his narrative.

There is, however, another play in *Lolita* that I have yet to account for: the *Enchanted Hunters*, written by Clare Quilty and performed by Lolita, Mona Dahl and company. In the thirteenth chapter of part two of the novel Humbert goes to see Lolita perform in this play. Her role is that of a "farmer's daughter who imagines herself to be a witch, or Diana" (200). The role is bizarrely metaphysical since it implies that Lolita is playing a role within a role (just as the *Enchanted Hunters* this play is a play-within-a-play, and indeed, there is a real Lolita behind the "solipsized" Lolita). It becomes apparent to Humbert as he is writing this account that Quilty must have written the play, as if he were Prince Hamlet staging the events of his uncle's own treasonous murder before him to taunt him:

> The coincidence of the title was pleasant in a sad little way… I assumed the play was just another, practically anonymous, version of some banal legend… In other words, I did not know—and would not have cared, if I did—that actually *The Enchanted Hunters* was a quite recent and technically original composition which had been produced for the first time only three or four months ago by a highbrow group in New York.
> (201)

Quilty, being the most prominent playwright in *Lolita*'s cast, seems the most likely culprit to have authored the *Enchanted Hunters*. This also makes sense because Quilty was the only one apparently aware of Humbert and Lolita's rendeazvous at the Enchanted Hunters Inn. In writing this chapter, however, Humbert withholds the name because he has not yet

revealed him to be an individual of any consequence. That is why he "would not have cared" had he known that Quilty was the author. It is not until a few chapters later after she has quit the play that Lolita tells Humbert that the author of the play was "Clare Something" (209).

* * *

Humbert's plight in *Lolita* is aptly epitomized by his masturbatory fantasies and his inability to sustain those fanciful images in reality. As he closes his account of his and Lolita's fling at the Enchanted Hunters Inn he states his goal in writing *Lolita*: "A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (134). Before meeting Lolita most of his engagements with nymphets have consisted of ogling them from a safe distance while obscurely masturbating, which he refers to as "one-sided diminutive romances" (20). Early in the novel Humbert recalls two such occasions and emphasizes that the distance from the nymphets allows his fantasies to blossom: "Thus isolated, thus removed, the vision acquired an especially keen charm that made my heart race with all speed toward my lone gratification" (20). In the following chapter he muses on the future lives of these nymphets as a consequence of having been lustily gazed upon by Humbert:

> A propos: I have often wondered what became of those nymphets later? In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, could it be that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect *their* future? I had possessed her—and she never knew it. All right. But would it not tell sometime later? Had I not somehow tampered with her fate by involving her image in my voluptas?
> (21)

That Humbert is actually thinking about how these girls eventually end up is incongruous with the lack of concern he has over Lolita's future after masturbating in front of her. As it

turns out, Humbert's notion of these girls' eventual futures is fairly sensationalist. He recalls a prostitute he met named "Monique". He enjoys her company for a few days but on their third date he notice she has "grown less juvenile, more of a woman overnight" (23). He breaks off his correspondence with her stating, "So let her remain, sleek, slender Monique, as she was for a minute or two: a delinquent nymphet shining through the matter-of-fact whore" (23). Humbert hyperbolically postulates that all nymphets will grow up to be prostitutes presuming they encounter a nympholept like himself at some point during preadolescence. This is a dubious thought firstly because Humbert has only ever *wondered* about the future of nymphets though he has never actually seen one develop into prostitute. Secondly, Humbert demonstrates in his writing no knowledge of Monique's background, so it seems unlikely that she was fated to become a prostitute merely because had witnessed a man publically masturbating as a child. Nonetheless, the question of Humbert's ability to alter fate is one that becomes significant throughout the novel.

Aubrey McFate is a faceless name in *Lolita* though a very significant character nonetheless. McFate is introduced in Lolita's class list and a few pages later it has become the name that Humbert uses for "that devil of mine" (56). Just before ascribing the name McFate to this devil Humbert writes, "The passion I had developed for that nymphet—for the first nymphet in my life that could be reached at last by my awkward, aching, timid claws—would have certainly landed me again in a sanatorium, had not the devil realized that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted to have me as a plaything for sometime longer" (56). Humbert displays an awareness early on of someone meddling in with his life, altering his fate in the way he thought he might have altered the fates of those nymphets he ogled. He describes himself as a "plaything" of McFate, much the same way Lolita will

become his plaything in the following chapter. Similarly, Humbert remarks that in the Enchanted Hunters Inn, "My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me" (133-4). The turns of fate he is aware of are quite real, but it is this awareness that drives him insane.

After his engagement to Charlotte Humbert becomes pleased with the prospect of promised proximity to Lolita. He marvels at his "mastery over fate" (72). This mastery, however, is rattled various times throughout the novel. He becomes paranoid when he becomes aware of Quilty's pursuing presence and his delusions lead to a more erratic phase of mind: "For a day or two, I enjoyed the mental emphasis with which I told myself that we were not, and never had been followed; and then I became sickeningly conscious that Trapp had changed his tactics and was still with us, in this or that rented car" (227). Quilty/Trapp's presence urges Humbert on at first thinking he is a police office ("we could not shake off detective Trapp" 216) and later becoming fearful that he and Lolita have been conspiring ("I was goddam sure she had started the car to prevent me from walking up to Trapp" 229). After Quilty has been dispatched by Humbert he writes, "This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for by Quilty" (305). He feels he has been manipulated by Quilty, a twisted playwright, as he "struts and frets his hour upon the stage"—to quote the Bard.

Humbert's life has been manipulated in some way, but by who exactly is unclear. If Quilty was in fact manipulating Humbert's life for the sake of an "ingenious play" then he must have fancied his handiwork since he is "smirking" and "talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner" (303) as Humbert is pumping him full of bullets. Humbert's rage comes from an awareness that his every move is being taunted by Quilty. Humbert begins

to become aware of subtle clues left by Quilty in hotel recorders: "His main trait was his passion for tantalization. Goodness, what a tease the poor fellow was! He challenged my scholarship… What a shiver of triumph and loathing shook my frail frame when, among the plain innocent names in the hotel recorder, his fiendish conundrum would ejaculate in my face" (250). He can feel himself being ridiculed by Quilty's game of pleasure and this provokes his search for the elusive playwright.

It is of course Nabokov, not Humbert Humbert, that wrote *Lolita*, so all of its characters are subject to *his* machinations instead of the narrator's. Humbert, however, never seems to be in the know about the true identity of his McFate. Vladimir Nabokov's name only appears in the actual text of the novel anagrammatically as "Vivian Darkbloom" co-author (alongside Quilty) of "The Lady Who Loved Lightning," (31). Nabokov otherwise remains inconspicuous throughout *Lolita* except to those familiar with Nabokov's oeuvre. Nabokov does conspicuously modify the course of fate at times, but he always has his old collaborator, Quilty, to pin the blame on.

* * *

Late in the novel Humbert takes to reciting and composing poetry as a means of relief from his increasing moral burden. After remorsefully ruminating on the life he has deprived of Dolores Haze he quotes a couplet by an "old poet":

> The moral sense in mortals is the duty
> We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty.
> (283)

By this logic the obliteration of a beautiful thing (or in the case of Lolita, the beautiful things she could have been) is the price to pay for immortalizing that beauty. Matthew Winston

writes, “Repentant and remorseful, [Humbert] glorifies and compensates himself by writing a book about his love for [Lolita]. The corollary of this process, of course, is that both of them are converted into literary characters we encounter in *Lolita*, a book which, as we have seen, endeavors ‘to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets’ (136). Humbert’s greatness as a writer lies in his success at “fixing” Lolita within the pages of a book, but the identical process in his life constitutes his greatest crime as a human being.”[xxi] In other words Lolita’s beauty can be gleaned from the text of *Lolita* but it is only with Humbert’s sexual and “solipsized” narrative slant. Unfortunately, that version of Lolita is the one that Humbert will always deprive of life and will, but until another way is glimpsed out of Humbert’s narrative that is the only way Dolores “Lolita” Haze can be resurrected.

Portnoy's Degradation of Art and Aesthetic Impotence

"No matter where he goes and how many
girls he can have in his bed,
[Portnoy] is still a masturbator at heart,
still rebelling against the undefeatable."
-Alfred Kazin[xxii]

After looking at isolated instances of masturbation in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses* and Chapter 13, Part 1 of *Lolita* it may come as a surprise to some of my readers that I have little intention of dealing with *Portnoy's Complaint* in the same capacity. This is partly because there are too many instances of masturbation to choose from, but I would venture to say that while *Portnoy's Complaint* is often called "a book about masturbation", it is far more than that. Even so, the process of reading the book *is* very similar to masturbation. The laughs one gets out of reading Portnoy and *agreeing* with his radically honest opinions—uttered in a supposedly confidential setting, mind you—is orgasmic in the relief derived from throwing off taboos and the slapstick 'poetic justice' (as I refer to it in my own marginalia) of Portnoy ejaculating into his own eye and blinding himself; Dante scholars call this '*contrapasso'.* The reader's subsequent recognition of Portnoy's (possibly inadvertent though nonetheless evident) ignorance of his own contribution to the unfortunate circumstances in others lives gives the novel a complexion of greater emotional substance. Portnoy's "contributions", however, are veiled by his fragmented narrative. If one, however, rearranges the vignettes to piece together a coherent plot, the tragic side of the text becomes more apparent. It is after this rearrangement that the novel morphs in the mind of the reader from being a bawdy slapstick novel into a resonating piece of aesthetic literature (in the tradition I described in my *Ulysses* chapter) where all

the narrative pieces harmonize and there are things resembling real people in the novel rather than merely resembling archetypes, as Portnoy so often forcibly portrays them. The aesthetic effect of realizing this tragedy can result in shame stemming from a number of sources: shame from having agreed with Portnoy, whose ignorance is revealed increasingly as the novel progresses; or shame from having laughed at the misfortune of the characters in *Portnoy's Complaint*; or prideful shame of having not seen the full scope of what Roth was trying to show us. Either way, the effect of the novel on the reader is bittersweet like masturbation: the narrative is orgasmically enjoyable until you glimpse the darkside of yourself in *Portnoy* (whose darkside is so mammoth that it is hard to imagine a person who does not reluctantly agree with him on at least one point).

While the substantial content of *Ulysses* and *Lolita* is readily apparent by their respective authors' commands over the English language, I assert that the same is not so readily noticeable of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Alex Portnoy's erratic and hysteric prose is vulgar by nature a distraction from a latent and genuinely sad subplot (which also seems to constitute latent material in Portnoy's subconscious). Portnoy's constant discussion of filthy matters has an immediate comedic effect, but veils some very substantial latent content. In fact, *Portnoy's Complaint* is a comedy and tragedy rolled into one, but where the comedy has been given ample attention, the tragic parts of the novel often go unnoticed, even by Portnoy. This may seem rather obvious; the image of The Monkey threatening to kill herself as Portnoy walks out on her in Rome is certainly tragic, but her tragedy has more to do with how she got there, and what events led her to such helplessness (some of which Portnoy unwittingly played a part in). The tragedy resides in Portnoy's ignorance of his own discernible contribution to the misfortunes of his surrounding cast, and his

tendency to glorification of other unfortunate circumstances in those people's lives (e.g. he is "mesmerized" by Mandel's fatherless boyhood. 172) which he cannot comprehend due to his own lack of appreciation for the sacrifice that his family regularly make for him and never tell him of. Ironically, knowledge of this contribution to the strife of others has the potential to contribute to his own mental instability. The "complaints" that Portnoy weighs against his mother—*nagging* over his lack of marital prospects, the contributions he feels she's made to his Oedipal complex, her insistence on adherence to Jewish practices—are nothing compared to the complaints that she is entitled to make regarding her husband's infidelity (which Portnoy only seems to become aware of during his sessions with Dr. Spielvogel).

Portnoy's Complaint is manically narrated by Alexander Portnoy, a young-ish Jewish man from Newark working as the Assistant Commisioner for the City of New York Commision on Human Opportunity, during sessions in the office of his psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel. The book described in terms equally *colorful* and vulgar the type of things which previously made books unpublishable in the United States, and were the source of various other controversies in other parts of the world throughout history: masturbation, sex, religious skepticism, etc. However, in comparison to *Ulysses,* and *Lolita*—the two books I have already addressed—Roth seems to have experienced little trouble in having *Portnoy's Complaint* published. In fact, Random House gave Roth a $250,000 advance to publish *Portnoy* (Promiscuous 25). Retrospectively, this rather large advance seems like no wager, but rather a bid on a book whose eventual success was never in doubt. The book sold 275,000 copies in its first two days and 420,000 copies in ten weeks.[xxiii] If you ask someone what made the book famous the answer is usually fairly simple and does not require any

particularly advanced literary analysis: the novelty of its vulgar depiction of sex and masturbation. This is, at the very least, what Roth felt his audience had been drawn to; In his personal notes to a lecture he gave at Bard College in the autumn of 1999 he writes, "Masturbation, *which seems to have made the book famous* [emphasis added], was the least of it. It was the aggressive rage, the ingratitude, the hatred that was the most shameful secret"[xxiv]. Of course, there is much more to Roth's novel than masturbation and much of this often gets overlooked. The above quote states that masturbation is what drew an audience (or at least got people talking), but there is a greater substance to the book that is overshadowed by this. For evidence of this you need look no further than the testimonials printed on the back of the most recent (1994) paperback edition of *Portnoy's Complaint* you begin to notice a trend: "Simply one of the two or three funniest works in American fiction," says the Chicago Sun-Times. The New York Times called it, "Deliciously funny…absurd and exuberant, wild and uproarious…a brilliantly vivid reading experience." Alfred Kazin for The New York Review of Books writes, "Touching as well as hilariously lewd… Roth is vibrantly talented… as marvelous a mimic and fantasist as has been produced by the most verbal group in human history." Obviously these quotes are printed on the book for the express reason of selling as many copies as possible so you cannot fault these quotes for their omissions—the publisher, after all, ultimately reserves the right to print as much of the quote as they like without changing its nature. What I find noteworthy, however, is that these quotes characterize the book almost exclusively as though it were a comedy. Kazin's use of the word "touching" gives one a better sense of the book's emotional spectrum, but even this still seems to omit a great deal of the novel's emotional potential.

It seems to me that the legacy of *Portnoy's Complaint* as a "funny book about masturbation" is highly reductive. There are too many tragedies in the novel for this assessment of the book to be complete. Furthermore, the nature of many of the events in *Portnoy's Complaint* is that a lot of the 'tragedies' go unnoticed by Portnoy, and it seems that as a result a large portion of the novel's audience missed these details (at least after their first reading), choosing instead—consciously or subconsciously—to laugh at the funny bits and ignore the sadness. This is about as close to masturbation as reading gets, at least in the mental faculties of the consumer. If one recognizes during a later rereading that they had missed these sad moments in *Portnoy* it may result in shame: a moral shame as a result of having previously agreed with or laughed at Portnoy's short-sighted assessment of the plight of these unfortunate characters, or shame from not having glimpsed the tragedy behind the hilariously filthy narrative that Portnoy has constructed and lived in. This 'shameful' phase of a 'masturbatory reading' of *Portnoy's Complaint* is, despite a lack of *pleasure*, arguably the most meaningful because by recognizing the rift between Portnoy's perceived "reality" and the real circumstances of those around him we can discern the same rift as it inevitably exists in our lives in varying degrees. As a result, *Portnoy's Complaint* does not give us any conclusive "truths" (it is after all, fiction), but it does help one get closer to truth simply by showing us the fallacy of Portnoy's—and by effect, our own—notions of "truth".

* * *

One of the main reasons that Portnoy fails to grasp reality is that he is insistent upon seeing himself and others as fitting into his own "psychoanalytical" narrative, which he has derived from an apparent knowledge of Freud's teachings. In the book's first chapter—by

far its tamest—Portnoy describes his childhood fascination with his mother and his low opinion of his father as an impotent man incapable of making even his bowels move. The relationship between Sophie and young Alex is one that appears be a 'normal mother-son relationship' in that there are no sexual or violent actions made by either individual against the other, but Portnoy presents this story as though he were constantly seduced or threatened by his mother. This seems more likely to be Portnoy's imaginative faculties at play over the course of a couple of decades, leading to a narrative that simultaneously describes events that probably *did* happen—or at the very least *could* have happened—but misattributes the motives behind them as stemming from an Oedipal source rather than the emotional unrest of his mother (in the case of "the knife"). In other instances he perceives a sexual tension between his mother and he, where it seems more likely that Sophie is simply lavishing motherly affection on her child rather than veiling a sexual attraction for her son. A critical look at this chapter gives the reader an understanding of the mechanics of Portnoy's subconscious imagination and the way he suppresses crucial details in his retelling of what he feels are psychologically significant memories.

Portnoy constantly evokes stereotypes and archetypes as a way of understanding the absurd nature of people in his life. Rather than finding relief in the recognition of people as archetypes, it frustrates him because of the lack of resolution. This means that Portnoy makes a concerted effort to sustain the labels that he has affixed people even if that means overlooking details that would render those labels as unfounded. For example, when Portnoy experiences his first hand job issued by someone other than himself he is insistent upon seeing the agent of the hand job as a "prostitute" per his understanding of the "sex object" from Freud's writing on "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic

Life."[xxv] What he fails to see is how forcefully he and his friends have made Bubbles Girardi, the girl in question, fit that assessment. Furthermore, he does not seem to realize how terribly his understanding of Freud's theory has failed to fulfill his sexual urges, as is made evident by his impotence during his encounter with Bubbles.

Freud's theory says that psychical impotence is the result of when "[t]wo currents whose union is necessary to ensure a completely normal attitude in love have […] failed to combine. These two may be distinguished as the *affectionate* and *sensual* current" (Freud, 395). Of the "affectionate" current Freud says, "It springs from the earliest years of *childhood*; it is formed on the basis of the interest of self-preservative instinct and is directed to the members of the family and those who look after the child" (395). Freud then goes on, "These affectionate fixations of the child persist throughout childhood, and continually carry along with them erotism, which is consequently diverted from its sexual aim. Then at the age of puberty they are joined by the powerful 'sensual' current which no longer mistakes its aims" (396). In other words, when the person reaches puberty the sexual element of their love is no longer latent; they become aware of the inherent sexual nature of adult affection—or so Freud propounds. At this stage Freud says two factors will decide if the development of the libido will fail: "*frustration in reality* which opposes the new object-choice" and "the amount of *attraction* which the infantile objects that have to be relinquished are able to exercise" (396). This means that according to Freud psychical impotence will result if the subject in question either finds their own sexual fantasies irreconcilable with the reality of their desired partner *or* if their attraction to their "infantile-objects" (i.e. parents, etc.) overpowers their sexual attraction to that partner. Furthermore, Freud says that the object choice of the sensual current "will still be based on

the model (imago) of the infantile ones, but in the course of time will attract to themselves the affection that was tied to the earlier ones [i.e. the parents]" (396). He then comes to the conclusion: "The greatest intensity of sensual passion will bring with it the highest psychical valuation of the object—this being the normal overvaluation of the sexual object on the part of the man" (396). The word "normal" and its proximity to "overvaluation" seems somewhat absurd. Freud explains, however, that our psyche has a kind of 'loophole' to break from impotence from this "normal overvaluation": "The main measure against such a disturbance which men have recourse to in this split in their love consists in a psychical *debasement* of the sexual object, the overvaluation that normally attaches to the sexual object being reserved for the incestuous object and its representatives. As soon as the condition of debasement is fulfilled sensuality can be freely expressed, and important sexual capacities and a high degree of pleasure can develop" (399). *This* "condition" Freud states unequivocally, so it should follow that all Portnoy has to do to ensure that he will *perform* is debase his desired sex object—here I turn again to the sad case of Bubbles Girardi.

First some background on Bubbles: she is an "eighteen-year-old girl who had been thrown out of Hillside High School and was subsequently found floating in the swimming pool at Olympic Park by my lascivious classmate, Smolka" (Roth 165). Smolka claims to have received oral sex from Bubbles (or so Portnoy says on page 173), which results in her being labeled a "hoor" (171) by Portnoy's cronies. Smolka brings Mandel and Portnoy to Bubbles house with the intention of "talk[ing her] into taking on his two friends as a special favor to him" (166). She objects at first, but after some *persuasion* from Smolka agrees to give a hand job to only one of them. Alex wins a coin toss to decide who receives the 'favor'

and enters with Bubbles into the Girardi's living room. "Vigorously," Portnoy says, "the ordeal begins. But it is like trying to jerk off a jellyfish" (178). After some time has elapsed and both parties have become frustrated by Alex's impotence, he arrives at a solution: "I will forget that this fist tearing away at me belongs to Bubbles—I'll pretend it's my own! So, fixedly I stare at the dark ceiling, and instead of making believe that I am getting laid, as I ordinarily do while jerking off, I make believe that I am jerking off" (179). Portnoy's imaginative effort begins "instantly to take effect" (179). It is only by way of his imaginative faculty—it also aids his masturbation—that he is able to overcome impotence. What is disconcerting about Portnoy's character, however, is how little of the story he seems to recognize as imagined.

When Portnoy and his friends arrive at the Girardi house, "Bubbles was working over he ironing board […] in her slip!" (166). When Portnoy sees this girl that he has never met in her slip who is friend assures him is a "whore" he only sees the sexual side of her being. If she were lying supine on the couch in lingerie it might have been believable that she was deliberately dressed provocatively. On the other hand, it seems much more plausible that since Bubbles is diligently ironing clothes when the boys have arrived unannounced, she is not wearing her 'slip' in order to arouse her guests but because she has not had time to put on other clothes. Furthermore, as Bubbles reluctantly takes Portnoy into the living room she tells him sternly, "you're the only one I'm doing it to. You and that's it." Portnoy responds by saying, "It's entirely up to you," (177) failing to recognize that it took Smolka a half hour to persuade her after Mandel had stated quite clearly, "I ain't leaving till she either sucks it or pulls it—one or the other!" (177). Portnoy makes certain to that his side of the dialogue with Bubbles is always 'polite' and considerate of her

feelings: “Fine, fine. Whatever *you* say”; “Sure, if that’s what *you* want” (178). He conveniently overlooks the fact that he and his friends have forcefully made her undertake this ‘whore’-ish task.

Before Portnoy ever meets Bubbles he already thinks of her as a “whore”. After their awkward (to put it very mildly) encounter she becomes something else in addition to a “whore”: an anti-Semite. As she abandons the task of trying to pleasure the impotent Alex on her couch, he reaches down to his own member and finishes the job himself, the result being a mess of semen over the Girardi living room. Her response is bluntly, “Son of a bitch kike! […] You got gissum all over the couch! And the walls! And the lamp!” (180). She follows this up with further anti-Semitic name calling: “Sheeny!”, “Hebe!” (182). Portnoy takes this as a clear indication that Bubbles is an anti-Semite and furthermore has always been one. He does not, however, see the ways in which he has perpetuated anti-Semitism. Three Jewish boys just came to the house of a *shikse* and forced her to give them sexual favors. I give no endorsement of Bubbles hate speech—anti-Semitism is thoroughly reprehensible—but Portnoy has conveniently overlooked the ways in which he has contributed to it. He feels beyond reproach for the ‘consideration’ he had given to Bubbles’ feelings when he first entered her living room, even though his friends had insisted that they would not leave until she had given one of them a hand job. His oversight is the kind that is ubiquitous in masturbation and this is the very error that pervades Portnoy’s psyche.

Bubbles’ story does not end there. In fact, it ends a few pages before the aforementioned encounter. Portnoy runs into his friend Arnold Mandel, who had been at the Girardi’s house, some years after incident, somewhat recently before his telling the

story to Dr. Spielvogel. Mandel has come across some news about Bubbles: “She got murdered. In a bar on Hawthorne Avenue, right down from The Annex. She was with some boogey and then some other boogey came in and shot them both in the head. How do you like that? Fucking for boogies” (175). With the knowledge of the real nature of how Portnoy and his friends had procured sexual efforts from Bubbles when she was merely eighteen-years old, this seems like a terrible tragedy to which they had contributed. The encounter she had with Portnoy and his friends seems very likely to have been her first time “whoring”, and it was done by force. The fact that she later became a prostitute and died, rather than causing Portnoy any grief, only validates his notion of an order based on cause-and-effect. His response to Mandel is tragically simple and short-sighted: “‘Wow’ I said, and meant it. Then suddenly—‘Listen, Ba-ba-lu, whatever happened to Smolka?’” (175). Bubbles Girardi winding up as a dead prostitute is exactly where Portnoy had always figured she would end up because she was always a ‘whore’ to him, her human qualities always marginalized in his mind to a degree that they seemed non-existent. What surprises him more, defying this same sense of cause-and-effect, is that his friends Mandel and Smolka, a couple of delinquents, should turn out to be successful and happily married while he, so self-righteous, should be so alone and miserable despite his success.

* * *

The Monkey may be the only character that rivals Mr. and Mrs. Portnoy as the most recurrent figure in Portnoy’s diatribe—despite Portnoy’s characteristic marginalization of her. Portnoy remembers his first sight of her: “...there she is, wearing a tan pants suit, and

trying to hail a cab—lanky, with dark and abundant hair, and smallish features that give her face a kind of petulant expression, and an absolutely fantastic ass" (157). Portnoy's remark on her "fantastic ass" seems like both an addendum to a sentence that has already been completed and yet too enthusiastic to be considered a mere footnote. This is the total image that Portnoy recalls from first seeing The Monkey: a tan pants suit, a face with smallish features, and a "fantastic ass". All the same it is enough to compel him to approach her. His first proposition, to buy her a drink fails, but his blunt follow up—"To eat your pussy, baby, how's that?"—elicits an affirmative response from The Monkey. The Monkey at this point becomes the real life manifestation of Portnoy's masturbatory fantasies: "The real McCoy! My slut from the Empire Burlesque—without the tits, but so beautiful!" (159). Earlier, as a developing teenager Portnoy had gone to the Burlesque and gives the "sluttiest-looking slut in the chorus line" the name "Thereal McCoy". After the burlesque show, while recounting his days spent chasing *shikses* at the ice-skating rink, Portnoy proclaims, "But who wants character! I want Thereal McCoy!" (151). Portnoy insists on seeing these girls that he is chasing after—and knows nothing about other than their religious persuasion—as "sluts" without considering the idea that maybe these girls object to that label. He also does not seem to realize the irony of the name that he gives his fantasy; "Thereal McCoy" that he fantasizes about is modeled after a performer in a burleseque show. In other words, "the sluttiest-looking slut in the chorus line" is only an act, and it may well be that this dancer lives a normal life outside of the Empire Theatre. But in Portnoy's head she is always Thereal McCoy, the "slut", and so too are any of the girls that he affixes this label to.

At their first meeting The Monkey becomes "*the real* McCoy" [emphasis added] because she is, in more ways than Portnoy is willing to believe, living, breathing, flesh and

blood, and most importantly *real*. For the first time in his life he has encountered his living fantasy and he can finally dispose of his mentally constructed "Thereal McCoy", but he chooses only to dispose of the name. Instead he has supplanted this fantasy onto Mary Jane Reed and coins a new cruel name for her, the one I have been using and the one she is most often remembered for: The Monkey.

When she is first introduced in the novel Portnoy explains that the nickname 'The Monkey' "derives from a little perversion she once engaged in shortly before meeting me and going on to grander things" (106). The "perversion" he is describing comes to light some pages later following an exchange with the monkey that has a familiar passive tone resembling Portnoy's "politeness" with Bubbles Girardi:

> Later we had a long, serious, very stirring conversation about perversions. She began by asking if I had ever done it with a man. I asked (as I gathered she wanted me to) if she had ever done it with a woman.
> "…Nope."
> "…Would you like to?"
> "…Would you like me to?"
> "…Why not, sure."
> "…Would you like to watch?"
> "…I suppose so."
> "…Then maybe it could be arranged."
> "…Yes?"
> "…Yes."
> "…Well, I might like that."
> "Oh," she said, with a nice sarcastic edge, "I think you might."
> (158-9)

The source of The Monkey's "sarcastic edge" is then made clear by the following anecdote that explains her eponymous "perversion":

> She told me then that only a month before, when she had been ill with a virus, a couple she knew had come by to make dinner for her. After the meal they said they wanted her to watch them screw. So she did. She sat up on the bed with a

> temperature of 102, and they took off their clothes and went at it on the bedroom rug—"And you know what they wanted me to do, while they were making it?"
>
> "No."
>
> "I had some bananas on the counter in the kitchen, and they wanted me to eat one. While I watched."
>
> "For the arcane symbolism no doubt."
>
> "The *what?*"
>
> "Why did they want you to eat the banana?"
>
> "Man, I don't know. I guess they wanted to know I was really *there*. They wanted to like *hear* me. Chewing. Look, do you just suck cock, or do you fuck too?
> (159)

Seemingly in response to that last line Portnoy says to Spielvogel, "The real McCoy! My slut from the Empire Burlesque—without the tits, but so beautiful!" (159). He seems to think the fact that The Monkey has asked to fuck means that she is a "slut", but he misses that he seems to have struck a raw nerve with his line of question and her inquiry is merely a way of changing the subject. This comes to a head when he presses her by asking, "do you do this, more or less, all the time…?" meaning picking up strange men off the street. The ensuing outrage that arise from The Monkey causes her to spiritedly ask, "What kind of a shit-eating remark is that? […] Don't you think I have feelings *too!*" Portnoy then says to Spielvogel, "But suddenly, where there had been fury and outrage, there were only tears. Did I need any more evidence that this girl was, to say the least, a little erratic psychologically?" (160). The Monkey then seems to offer an explanation, the nature of which Portnoy does not understand:

> "Look," she said, wiping away the tears with the pillowcase, "look, I lied to you before, in case you're interested, in case you're writing this down or something." […] "I mean like what the fuck did I lie for, to *you?*"
>
> "I don't know what you're talking about, so I can't tell you."
>
> "I mean *they* didn't want me to eat the banana. My friends didn't want me to eat the banana. *I* wanted to."
> Thus: The Monkey.
> (161)

Portnoy then tries to make sense of this: "As for why she did lie, to *me?* I think it was her way of informing herself right off—semiconsciously, I suppose—that she had somehow fallen upon a higher-type person…" (161). This meditation goes on for another page in a self-congratulatory tone of how The Monkey has found the man "of *her* dreams" who would educate her. He has essentially construed her lie as a "semi-conscious" compliment when in fact it is not.

The lie that The Monkey tells Portnoy about the banana is in fact a strange attempt at a confession. Understanding the nature of the confession is the key to rationalizing most everything about The Monkey that Portnoy considers 'irrational' or 'erratic'. *She* wanted to eat the banana while she watched her friends have sex because the people having sex are not her friends but rather her husband with another woman. Her lie was that the couple had wanted her to eat it so that they could hear her and know that she is there, but the truth is that *she* wanted to eat it so that *they* would know she was there. The irony is that if Portnoy understood the nature of this lie then he might possibly be able to be fully aware of the real Mary Jane Reed's (The Monkey's real name) presence rather than just the presence of The Monkey's "fantastic ass". Furthermore, the "sarcastic edge" that Portnoy had sensed when The Monkey said that she thinks he will like watching is entirely misread. There is sarcasm, but Portnoy senses a playful understatement when The Monkey's sarcasm is actually rooted in her firsthand knowledge that he watching is far less enjoyable than partaking in the activities because she has already had to watch her husband with someone else and knows how awful it feels.

Portnoy is certainly aware that The Monkey had been married since he says, "When two met, nearly a year ago now, The Monkey had already been through her marriage and

her divorce" (155). He does not seem to understand, however, that The Monkey is still living with her husband when she and Portnoy first become intimate. Her and her husband's sex life is eerily similar to that of her "friends" who had come over to have sex while she watched:

> Subsequent to the marriage, his sex life consisted of getting into bed with his young and beautiful bride and jerking off into a copy of a magazine called *Garter Belt* […] What cause her to run for her life were the little orgies he began to arrange after jerking off into *Garter Belt* (or was it *Spiked Heels*) became a bore to both of them. A woman, preferably black, would be engaged for a very high sum to squat naked upon a glass coffee table and take a crap while the tycoon lay flat on his back, directly beneath the table, and jerked his dong off. And as the shit splattered on the glass six inches above her beloved's nose, The Monkey, our poor Monkey, was expected to sit on the red damask sofa, fully clothed, sipping cognac and watching. (155-6)

This seems to be the story that The Monkey has told Portnoy of her husband. While his description does contain the word "orgies", the fetish it describes is not does not involve sexual contact of any manner. Still the similarities between her "watching" his activities in this description and watching "her friends" a month before meeting Portnoy seems to hint quite strongly that the husband is the male in the latter occasion as well. These details seem to be expunged from the account as told by The Monkey either out of shame or (more tragically) out of respect for Portnoy. Nonetheless, if Portnoy were not so focused on the "arcane symbolism" of the banana in The Monkey's story he might have been able to understand all these latent details and perhaps show some sympathy for the neglected wife. Instead, he is too focused on getting his rocks off and has instead chosen to believe that The Monkey is some sort of deviant.

The relationship that exists between The Monkey and Portnoy is not masturbatory in any way physical way—sex between two people is 'sex' after all, and not 'masturbation'. It is masturbatory, however, in how superficially rooted it is in reality. Portnoy's fantasies,

which he seems to believe are reality, are incredibly degrading to the people they objectify. As a means of arriving at sexual satisfaction, he must suspend his disbelief that The Monkey, or Bubbles, or any other girl he has a sexual encounter with could ever be anything more than a "whore", but to do so is to overlook entirely the very real humanity in these various people.

* * *

In the final chapter of the novel Portnoy becomes frustrated with what he believes is appropriation of art by Freud: "*Oedipus Rex* is a famous tragedy, you schmuck, not another joke! You're a sadist, you're a quack and a lousy comedian! I mean this is maybe going too far for a laugh, Doctor Spielvogel, Doctor Freud, Doctor Kronkite! How about a little homage, you bastards, to The Dignity of Man! *Oedipus Rex* is the most horrendous *serious* play in the history of literature—it is not a gag!" (267). This assessment is rather hypocritical since Portnoy has previously irresponsibly used art for his own edification; he recites a poem to The Monkey with his pants around his ankles in the driver's seat of a parked convertible. He tells her, "You'll understand this one. It's about fucking. A swan fucks a beautiful girl" (191). The poem is "Leda and the Swan" by William Butler Yeats. "But it's a serious poem," he clarifies, just like he protests of *Oedipus Rex*. He recites the poem in total without a single error—This is a significant detail in its own right because with so much unverifiable in Portnoy's narrative, this is the first thing that can actually be checked. Elsewhere in the book Portnoy is highly critical of The Monkey's lack of intelligence—the greatest example is perhaps in his fascinated analysis of her letter to the housekeeper, Willa, in which she misspells "dear" as "dir" (205). After reciting Yeats' poem both Portnoy seems to become aware of his own pedantry: "William Butler Yeats wrote it,"

I said, realizing how tactless I had been, with what insensitivity I had drawn attention to the chasm: I am smart and you are dumb, that's what it had meant to recite to this woman one of the three poems I happen to have learned by heart in my thirty-three years" (192). If The Monkey was truly as emotionally erratic as Portnoy always seems to think she is then she may have taken some offense to this. Instead they engage in playful dialogue that emphasizes this apparent intellectual divide: "And down in Moundsville, honey, the only poem we had was 'I see London, I see France, I see Mary Jane's underpants'" (193). She follows this up with anecdote about sending a "lock of her snatch-hair off in an envelope to Marlon Brando" when she was fifteen (193). This reaffirms both notions that Portnoy has of her as 'stupid' and 'whorish'. The remark is met by a mutual silence while both parties ponder, "what two such unlikely people are doing together" (193). But then something happens which Portnoy does not expect; The Monkey asks him, "Okay, what's Agamemnon?" as if she has become aware of the low opinion that Portnoy has of her and is trying to rectify her 'stupidity'. He gives her a brief summary of his knowledge of the Trojan War, which admittedly "Half of it I *know* I'm getting wrong" (193). While Portnoy does not misspell the word "dear", it seems that when quizzed he is not as intelligent as he makes himself out to be.

If The Monkey's inquiry about Agamemnon was a surprise to Portnoy then what she says next is entirely unforeseeable: "Okay—now say it all again" (193). The same girl who spells simple four-letter words with three-letters has now taken an interest in the beautiful poetry of William Butler Yeats; there is hope for The Monkey yet! Portnoy obliges her request and to show him that she understood the poem The Monkey, "Takes hold of [his] hand, draws [his] fingers up between her legs… 'Feel. It made my pussy all wet'" (194). This

provides the perfect time for Portnoy to correct The Monkey's interpretation of "Leda and the Swan" and show her that rather than being a poem "about fucking," as he previously said, it is in fact a very serious poem that depicts rape. With his pants around his ankles and a one-track mind, however, Portnoy's response is "Sweetheart! You understood the poem!" (193). He has effectively perpetuated her inability to understand Yeats' poem and has made it solely a poem about sex, a purely masturbatory and gravely reductive interpretation if ever there was one. While the poem has become arousing and sexually potent in the mind of The Monkey, Portnoy has irresponsibly perpetuated her impotence to aesthetic content by failing to disclose the very grave substance of the poem.

Since *Professor* Portnoy has failed to teach The Monkey how to glean anything more than a sexual meaning from Yeats' poem he must deal with the fallout of such shortsighted interpretation. Later that night The Monkey suggests a wholly novel idea to Portnoy: "Hey, let's eat a big dinner, a lot of wine and chocolate, and then come up here, and get into our two-hundred-year-old bed—and not screw!" (195). Portnoy, unable to keep from thinking about sex for more than a couple of minutes, prods The Monkey for sex. She rejects the request, saying, "I'm saving myself for my husband." In reference to Yeats' poem Portnoy tells her, "That doesn't mean shit to a swan, lady." As he stuffs his penis into her hand she exclaims, "A *Jew*swan! Hey!" […] and grabbed at my nose with the other hand. "The indifferent beak! I just understood more poem!... *Didn't* I?" (195). If The Monkey's original interpretation of "Leda and the Swan" as a purely sexual poem was irresponsible then surely the anti-Semitic interpretation here should be enough to provoke Portnoy's ire. His response, however, is simply "Christ, you *are* a marvelous girl!" (195). With his penis in her hand the sexual blinders turn on for Portnoy and he is willing to overlook anything so long

as it ends with sexual satisfaction. For the Monkey, Portnoy's compliment of her "marvelous" character is enough for her to present him with an offer to, "Pick a hole, any hole, I'm yours!" (196) despite their agreement to overnight celibacy. Just when it seems that Portnoy could make some progress with The Monkey after she has shown some willingness to oblige his interest in 'intelligent' matters, he diverts the purpose of art towards a sexual end and renders it completely impotent aesthetically.

* * *

While *Portnoy's Complaint* contains a rather sizeable cast of characters there are only two characters that speak for themselves in the book: Portnoy and Dr. Spielvogel. Having discussed Portnoy at some length I now turn to Spielvogel. To say Spielvogel "speaks" is true but it is also an overstatement. His only line (if you discount his contribution to a diagnostic manual entry on a condition called "Portnoy's Complaint" that precedes the title page) comes at the end of the novel in the form of a "punchline": "So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (274). Other than this he does not speak even when addressed by Portnoy. In this respect, he resembles The Monkey's therapist, Dr. Morris Frankel, to whom Portnoy gives the name "Harpo". Her sessions with "Harpo" are briefly described by Portnoy: "I was 'a breakthrough.' Harpo of course didn't say yes, but then he didn't say no, either, when she suggested that this was who I might be. He did cough, however, and this, The Monkey takes as her confirmation" (157). If we consider The Monkey's psychological situation as similar to Portnoy's then you can begin to see from this that Portnoy is to The Monkey variably a "breakthrough" or as he puts it a "big son of a

bitch Jew" (157). This is quite similar to the way that in Portnoy's mind The Monkey is variably "marvelous" or merely a "stupid whore". In both cases, this is understood without any analysis from the either Harpo or Dr. Spielvogel, but rather Portnoy sees the Monkey's assessment of him but does not make an effort to understand or overcome them. The Monkey, as I have already pointed out, does seem to become aware of the intellectual rift between her and Portnoy, but her efforts to educate herself are stymied by Portnoy's preoccupation with sex. Sex becomes a distraction for both parties from any efforts to the bridge the rift existing between them.

The punchline at the end of the book as it pertains the story is Spielvogel telling Alex that the psychoanalytical process may now begin. The absurd humor behind this is that Portnoy, having just purged himself of literally novels-worth of psychological issues, has not even begun to make any progress yet. What is less apparent is that Spielvogel, whether he knows it or not, is also speaking to his readers and prompting them to take another look at *Portnoy's Complaint* from the beginning. Irving Howe, a supporter of Roth early in his career, famously retracted his endorsement of him following the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint.* Howe said, "the cruelest thing that anyone can do with *Portnoy's Complaint* is to read it twice,"[xxvi] and despite disagreeing with him on the quality of Roth's work I think that this quote *is* correct. And yet at the novel's conclusion Spielvogel speaks up for the first time to prompt us to carry out that "cruel" task. In rereading *Portnoy* the "irrational" behaviors Portnoy asserts that people display are rationalized by the tragedies which those people are going through that Portnoy is never aware. He is uncritical of his own perceptions of people, because their behavior is so perfectly symptomatic of the conditions

read about in Freud and other psychoanalytical studies. The result of this behavior is a decidedly fatalist bent in Portnoy.

By virtue of his silence, Spielvogel also begins to resemble another character that has become implicated in Portnoy's narrative: the readers of *Portnoy's Complaint*. It is by way of this similarity that Roth is, in my opinion, at his most brilliant. Reading is a solitary activity usually carried out in silence with an occasional "cough", but the narrative carries on uninterrupted. This is the manner in which Portnoy reels off his diatribe unimpeded before his audience of Spielvogel(s). When he protests to Spielvogel that *Oedipus Rex* is not a joke but rather, it feels like his protest is *not* meant for Spielvogel, in fact, but for us. In this regard the book anticipates its reception (as I have summarized it earlier in this chapter) with incredible accuracy. His protest that a tragedy should not be interpreted as a part of psychoanalytical joke both hypocritical because of how frequently he psychoanalyzes things that should not usually warrant psychoanalysis, but also instils a pang of guilt on the reader even if his accusations are directed at Spielvogel and Freud. It is a criticism of the popular interpretation of *Portnoy's Complaint* as "hilarious" and if we compare the satisfaction of the laughs derived from reading *Portnoy* to the he satisfaction that Alex derives from The Monkey's sexual interpretation of "Leda and the Swan" then we have become no better than he is. A realization of this fact can lead to incredible introspection, prompting the reader to reevaluate a history in their own lives of opinions disguised as "reality".

Before the title page Roth includes, independent of the text that follows, an entry from a diagnostic manual on a condition called "Portnoy's Complaint", based on Alex Portnoy. The diagnosis that it is based on is wildly off the mark and breaks a number of

taboos. Firstly, the name "Portnoy's Complaint" is a reprehensible breach of doctor-patient confidentiality, especially since the entry also notes that Portnoy is still alive. It is almost as though Spielvogel is so excited about his new case study that he cannot even wait for the sap to kick the bucket before dragging his name in front of his colleagues. In the entry Spielvogel is quoted as saying, "Acts of exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, auto-eroticism, 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 overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration." Conveniently Spielvogel cites "morality" as the problem, a clear indication that he too has failed to see the tragically implicated individuals behind Portnoy's fanciful account. If Portnoy had any "morality" he may have been able to spare Bubbles Girardi, The Monkey, and his parents (amongst numerous others) a great deal of grief. As it stands, Spielvogel sees only the sexual side of things because that is all Portnoy is aware of. This is why I say Spielvogel resembles those readers who cannot discern the latent yet substantial tragedy behind Portnoy's accounts.

* * *

In conclusion, exclusively for the sake of *self-edification*, I would like to share my own experience of reading *Portnoy's Complaint*. By now it will be apparent that I frequently violated a cardinal sin in the realm of literary criticism: throughout this chapter on *Portnoy's Complaint* I have frequently cited an unidentified "reader"; I broke this literary taboo deliberately. The "reader" and I are one in the same. My position that *Portnoy's Complaint* has been frequently 'misread' is one that I feel now, having proven my point, I can back down from and admit that the 'misreading's I attributed in my essay to an obscure

'reader' are frequently my own. I apologize to my readers (this time I mean *you*) if this makes my essay seem 'misleading' or 'deceptive', but I felt compelled to take this stance because I *personally* feel that there *is* a way of misreading *Portnoy's Complaint* but that is to only read it once. By virtue of this, any single essay that I could have cited would have merely been a different perspective of Portnoy's single-perspective narrative. Irving Howe was right when he said that "the cruelest thing one could do is to read *Portnoy's Complaint* twice" in so much as it is cruel to subject oneself to seeing tears shed where one had once directed laughter, however, I thoroughly believe that it is far crueler to not give the novel the much deserved consideration of repeated (and varying) readings. It is only by way of this that Roth's readers (*all* of us) can broke out of a singular *masturbatory* reading (tragic *or* comedic) of his novel and overcome the *real* problem plaguing Portnoy, which is his proclivity to complain freely without dimensionalizing his worldview by acknowledging the varying perspectives (i.e. 'readings') of others—much like the phenomenon of *parallax*. *Portnoy's Complaint* is not simply a "tragedy", as I have referred to it throughout this essay, but it is certainly not just another joke either. There is no grave offense in taking away from *any* book what I call a 'masturbatory' reading, but nonetheless this cannot be considered the ever-elusive *complete* reading of *Portnoy's Complaint* that entails *multiple* readings.

Endnotes

[i] Kiberd, Declan. *Ulysses and Us.* New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. Print. 194.

[ii] Gifford, Don and Robert J. Seidman. *Ulysses Annotated.* 1974. Reprint. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print. n.13.632-34. * In citations referring to Don Gifford's annotations to *Ulysses* I give the line number from the Gabler Edition of *Ulysses* which the annotation refers to, *not* the page number in Gifford's book. I did this for the sake ease in finding the individual annotation in Gifford's book, which uses this format. In my essay, however, the citations from the actual text of *Ulysses* refer to the 1990 Vintage Classics Edition given above.

[iii] Ibid., n13.6-8.

[iv] "[*Little Review* editors Margaret] Anderson and [Jane] Heap were lucky. No one at the *Little Review* trial noticed the most scandalous aspect of "Nausicaa," the obscurity at the heart of the episode: while Gerty MacDowell is leaning back on the rocks, Leopold Bloom is masturbating" Birmingham, Kevin. *The Most Dangerous Book.* New York: Penguin, 2014. Print. 197.

→ However, the version of "Nausicaa" that appeared in the *Little Review* was edited by Ezra Pound and the most telling words were redacted. This version of the text has recently been republished by Yale University Press in "The Little Review 'Ulysses'" edited by Mark Gaipa, Sean Latham, and Robert Scholes.

[v] Kiberd, 201.

[vi] Ibid., 201.

[vii] Ibid., 197. On "Nausicaa" Kiberd writes, "Although their silent exchange occurs in the gathering dusk, it could hardly be classified as an exercise in the Celtic Twilight mode. Gerty will not turn into Yeats' glimmering girl, who led Wandering Aengus through hollow and hilly land." In *Portrait*, on the other hand, the girl at least has the appearance of a seabird, even if she does not literally anthropomorphize *a la* Celtic mythology.

[viii] Gifford, n13.2.

[ix] Ibid., n3.1.

[x] Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature.* New York: Harcourt, 1980. Print. 347.

[xi] Gifford, n13, fn1.

[xii] Kiberd, 194. Kiberd points out that Synge had said of Ireland, "every health mind is more interested in *Titbits* than in *Idylls of the King*." Kiberd himself also compares "young ladies fashion magazines" to "modern folklore".

[xiii] Nabokov, *Lectures.* 346.

[xiv] Gilbert, Stuart. *James Joyce's Ulysses.* 1930. Reprint. New York: Vintage, 1955. Print. 278.

[xv] Mullin, Katherine. *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity.* Cambridge, 2004. Print. 128.

[xvi] Willie's Hat was produced in 1897 by the American Mutoscope Company. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0216413/>

The following link is to a youtube video containing the "Peeping Tom" reel, also produced by the American Mutoscope Company in 1897.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15gKwzjq3xA>

[xvii] Concurring, *Jacobellis v. Ohio,* 378 U.S. 184 (1964).
[xviii] Tamir-Ghez, Nomi. "The Art of Persuasion in Lolita." *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook.* Ed. Ellen Pifer. New York: Oxford, 2003. Print. 24.
[xix] Bloom, Harold. *Lolita: Major Literary Characters.* New York: Chelsea House, 1993. Print. 178.
[xx] New York Society for the Suppresion of Vice. Sixth Annual Report. 1880. 11.
[xxi] Winston, Mathew. "Lolita and the Dangers of Fiction". *Twentieth Century Literature* 21.4 (1975): 421–427. Web. 425.
[xxii] "Conversation: Philip Roth," *PBS NewsHour,* November 10, 2004 (www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec04/roth_11-10.html). Cited by Avishai, Bernard. "Promiscuous: *Portnoy's Complaint* and our Doomed Pursuit of Happiness." New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. Print. 31.
[xxiii] Joe Peeples, "20th-Century American Bestsellers: *Portnoy's Complaint,*" *Graduate School of Library and Information Science: The iSchool at Illinois* (http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/courses/bestsellers/search.cgi?title=Portnoy's+Complaint). Cited by Avishai. 25-6.
[xxiv] Avishai, 10.
[xxv] This title has been translated in the Norton edition (which citations in my essay correspond to) as, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love". The alternate translation I have used is in keeping with the title that Roth gives to the third chapter in *Portnoy's Complaint*.
[xxvi] Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Commentary,* December 1972. Cited in "Promiscuous." Avishai. 6.

Bibliography**

JW Joyce, James. *Occassional, Critical, and Political Writing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

PA Joyce, James. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* 1993. Reprint. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.

SH Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero.* 1944. Reprint. New York: New Directions, 1963. Print.

U Joyce, James. *Ulysses.* 1934. Reprint. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

L Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita.* Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. 1970. Reprint. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Print.

PC Roth, Philip. *Portnoy's Complaint.* 1967. Reprint. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiæ.* Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Scotts Valley: NovAntiqua, 2008. Print.***

Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle.* Ed. Richard McKeon. 1941. Reprint. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Print

Avishai, Bernard. "Promiscuous: *Portnoy's Complaint* and our Doomed Pursuit of Happiness." New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. Print. 31.

Birmingham, Kevin. *The Most Dangerous Book.* New York: Penguin, 2014. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *Lolita: Major Literary Characters.* New York: Chelsea House, 1993. Print,

Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader.* Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989. Print.

Gifford, Don and Robert J. Seidman. *Ulysses Annotated.* 1974. Reprint. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.

Gilbert, Stuart. *James Joyce's Ulysses.* 1930. Reprint. New York: Vintage, 1955. Print.

Homer. *The Odyssey.* Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking Penguin, 1996. Print.

Kiberd, Declan. *Ulysses and Us.* New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. Print.

Mullin, Katherine. *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity.* Cambridge, 2004. Print.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature.* New York: Harcourt, 1980. Print.

Tamir-Ghez, Nomi. “The Art of Persuasion in Lolita.” *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: A Casebook.* Ed. Ellen Pifer. New York: Oxford, 2003. Print.

Winston, Mathew. “Lolita and the Dangers of Fiction”. *Twentieth Century Literature* 21.4 (1975): 421–427. Web.

**Primary sources cited most frequently in this essay are cited in-text using the abbreviations given to the left of their bibliographical information on this page. Other primary sources are simply cited using the last name of the author followed by the page number. All sources cited in this manner are listed on this page. All secondary sources are cited in the “Notes” section that follows.

***Citations from the Summa Theologiæ are given in the following format instead of by page number: volume, question, article.