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Oliwia Majchrowska
University of Wrocław

In Search of Autonomy: Sexuality and the Promise of Liberation in Witold Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*

ABSTRACT

Around the launch of the Penguin series *Writers from the Other Europe* in 1974, Philip Roth's novels turned to the intersections between sexuality and Jewish-American life with an increased intensity. Roth's choice to include Witold Gombrowicz in the series invites new perspectives on the representation of collective experience and individual freedom by writers who saw their heritage not only as ill-fated but also fraught. While both authors grapple with the idea of commitment to historically disadvantaged communities, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* spotlight the resistance growing in tandem with the narrators' sexual awakening. Although writing in politically disparate contexts and almost a decade apart, Roth and Gombrowicz use the theme of sexual desire to question the impact of difficult legacies on contemporary Jewish-American and Polish life, respectively. Ultimately, the novels' engagement with sexuality speaks to the idea of transgressing one's foundational ties to create an autonomous self, a question relevant for both the American myth and the vexed issues of national belonging shaped by the legacy of Polish Romanticism. This article argues that Roth and Gombrowicz engage with the theme of sexual desire to create a promise of liberation, which allows them to propel the tension between the individual and the collective. Despite leading to moments of emancipation, the characters' sexual awakening in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* fails to restore their autonomy, dramatizing the novels' images of imprisonment within the collectivity through a failed attempt to invent an autonomous self.

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Ever since entering the literary scene with *Goodbye, Columbus*, which would become part of his first collection of fiction in 1959, Philip Roth continued to interrogate how the past seeps into contemporary Jewish-American life. With his unapologetic images of anxiety-ridden Jewish sons revealing society's rejection of otherness as much as the resistance to assimilation among many immigrant parents, Roth's attitude towards his cultural background proves complex. Distrusting sentimentality at the same time as making an effort to understand the East European Jewish past through dialogues with survivor-writers such as Primo Levi and Aharon Appelfeld, Roth's oeuvre frames the question of contemporary Jewish-American identity as one of personal freedom. Far from discrediting the importance of the Holocaust for the Jewish experience, the author probes the possibility of reinventing the self in spite of the inherited historical burdens. Particularly interesting in the context of identity dynamics driven by the movement of the self against moral authority in Roth's work is his project of opening the Western reader to 20th-century Eastern European literature. *Writers from the Other Europe* was a series of seventeen novels published by Penguin Books between 1976 and 1983 in collaboration with Roth as a general editor. Dedicated to authors censored under the Soviet Regime, it invites a reflection on how disparate narratives respond to a similarly troubled national past. Apart from the affliction distinguishing Eastern Europeans and Jewish Americans after the Second World War, an intriguing link emerges between Roth and those authors on the list who staged a conflict of past and present in their works, preoccupied with the pressures of collective belonging rather than questions of adversity and misfortune alone.

Portraying the crisis of individual freedom after the war, Roth and Gombrowicz questioned the relentless presence of the heritage of suffering in their communities (Roth 77). Roth's choice to include the Polish writer in the Penguin series thus invites new perspectives on the literary treatment of collective experience and individual freedom. Ross Posnock notes that Roth's admiration for Gombrowicz is well-known (72), while Ira Nadel's biography *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* sheds light on Cynthia Ozick's gratitude towards Roth for introducing her to the Polish author (340). These perspectives encourage questions about the literary sensibility of the two writers, especially because a link between the works of Gombrowicz and Roth remains understudied. Having discovered Gombrowicz, Roth saw him as an author willing to "put himself at the centre of the chaos," as well as displaying "the devilishness, like the devilishness in Pinter that I liked" (qtd. in Pierpont 11). The comment about the provocative character of Gombrowicz's work applies also to Roth's own writing. Parallels

between the provocative tone and images of immaturity in Roth's and Gombrowicz's prose have been discussed by Posnock in *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. As one of two monographs in English scholarship that compare Gombrowicz and Roth, Posnock's work does not elucidate the connection between the collective experience and sexuality in the authors' novels.

This article will analyze the conflict between collective experience and autonomy in Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* (1960) and Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to evaluate the relationship between the characters' erotic awakening and their ability to break free from the surrounding sociocultural structures. Combining comparative analysis with theoretical perspectives on sexuality and liberation offered by Michel Foucault's second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I will argue that Roth and Gombrowicz engage with the theme of sexual desire to create a promise of liberation, which allows them to explore the tension between the individual and the collective. As my argument unfolds, I will show that despite leading to moments of emancipation, the characters' erotic awakening in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* fails to restore their autonomy, dramatizing the novels' image of imprisonment within the collectivity through a failed attempt to arrive at an autonomous self.

The two texts invite comparison as they both explore vexed boundaries between the individual and the collective against the erotic lives of the characters. *Pornografia*, narrated by a middle-aged writer, Witold, plays with the analogy between the protagonist's struggle to retrieve his autonomy and Gombrowicz's own search for authentic self-expression. Beginning with Witold's unexpected encounter with Fryderyk, the novel tells the story of the two characters' journey to the countryside, set against the background of German-occupied Poland. Throughout their visit, the protagonists develop a fascination with each other, leading to a mutual obsession with the youthfulness of the local teenagers and bizarre attempts to force the young people into a sexual union. *Portnoy's Complaint* reveals that the reality labelled by suburbanites as an ignominious urban past continues to shape Jewish life outside the new upper-class environments. Narrated in the first person by thirty-three-year-old Alexander Portnoy, the novel takes the form of a confession to a psychoanalyst, in which the intertwining of sexual obsessions and guilt is inextricably linked to the stigma of a working-class background and Jewish history. Grounded in tensions between the individual and the collective, both novels spotlight the narrators' growing desire to resist the mentality, demands, and norms within their communities; in other words, the desire to become autonomous.

TOWARDS THE INNER DYNAMICS: BECOMING A SUBJECT OF DESIRE

In the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault emphasizes a link between sexuality and liberation, observing that the emergence of the former as a term at the beginning of the 19th century corresponds with a change in how individuals assigned "meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings" (5). According to Foucault, autonomy emerges in the realm of sexual activity as one learns to "focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire" (*Hermeneutics* 13). A shift from the outer spheres of life towards the inner dynamics of the self brings into focus the individual value system and its reconfiguration when pleasures and feelings gain layers of previously denied meanings.

Focused on the problem of belonging to the community, in which the "individuality of members . . . might be completely swallowed up by the demands of the group struggle," *Pornografia* and *Portnoy's Complaint* make the orientation towards the inner dynamics of the self particularly meaningful (Izenberg 453). While rooted in the analysis of ancient culture, Foucault's perspective on the turn from the outer towards the inner as foundational to the relationship between sexuality and autonomy highlights the universal power of recognizing oneself as a subject of desire. In Foucauldian terms, the body represents the site on which discourses inscribe themselves with the possibility to be contested. The notion of the body as "the target of power" precludes "the liberal conception of individuals as unconstrained creative essences," at the same time, bringing into focus the inner dynamics of the self and its role as a potential locus of autonomy (Mills 82).

Rather than seeing individuals as stable entities, Foucault analyses "the discursive processes through which bodies are constituted" (83). What gives rise to such processes in *Pornografia* is the revival of myth-making in the postwar Polish society. The author looks critically at the Polish attitude towards the past, claiming that his choice to set the novel in 1943 should remind the nation that "its womb can accommodate conflicts, dramas, ideas other than those already theoretically established" (*Pornografia* 13). The statement problematizes the legacy of Polish Messianism with its efforts to justify suffering as a consequence of Poland's unique status in God's plan. Lying at the heart of this critique is the inability of the nation to invent itself beyond "the collective provinciality and its manias" (Gasyna 9).

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, interrogated through the positioning of the body as a site of resistance is the notion of Jewish-American belonging. Arising from the spirit of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Roth's

novel implicitly contrasts the rigid discourse surrounding interracial relationships and assimilation in the Jewish-American community with a broader cultural phenomenon encouraging liberation of the body from constraining cultural structures. Emerging from the tension between the individual and the collective is the awareness of "a body totally imprinted by history" (Mills 83). Consequently, in discovering desire against the reality of collective belonging, Portnoy shapes his sexual experience into a symbolic inversion of the Jewish-American discourse. In both novels, the body as "a site of struggle and discursive conflict" affords the characters the experience of the self beyond the ideas projected on them by the collective imagination (84).

"A LONGED-FOR ENDING OF SORTS": POLISH COLLECTIVE BELONGING

The state of collective stagnation leads the writer-protagonist in Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* to exclaim on the day of leaving Poland for Argentina:

> Oh, sail ye, sail ye my Compatriots to thy very own Nation! Sail ye to thy Nation sacred albeit Accursed! . . . Sail ye to that St. Crackpot of thine, by Nature accursed, for ever being born yet remaining Unborn! Sail ye, sail so he will . . . forever hold ye between Existence and Nonexistence. (8)

Written in a style parodying the tradition of "nobleman's storytelling" (*gawęda szlachecka*), which has its roots in Baroque literature, the passage mediates the image of the nation crippled by its own myths. Using the pejorative terms "St. Crackpot" ("*Cudak*"), "monster" ("*Stwór*"), and "St. Sluggard" ("*Ślamazara*") as equivalents to homeland, Gombrowicz speaks of a society in a state of abeyance. While the bold moments of sexual freedom in Roth's novel echo a broader countercultural dimension underlying the sexual revolution of the 1960s, no social shift of a similar kind exists in *Pornografia* to hold a mirror to the protagonist's self-discovery. Set in a world defined by intellectual inertia and well-worn debates about God and nation, the dominant image of society in *Pornografia* is, again, that of a grey zone between "Existence and Nonexistence."

Pornografia opens with the image of artists persisting in the routine of meetings in Krucza Street amid the havoc of war-devastated Warsaw. No longer a part of Zodiak, Ziemiańska, IPS—the centers of the avant-garde in the golden age of Poland's prewar cultural life—the group "trie[s] hard to go on as artists, writers, and thinkers" (7). Confronted with German military force, operations of bunches, the Underground Army, and the

Polish police, the narrator Witold finds himself inhibited by a sense of tragedy and contends with the imbalance between the collective and personal dimensions of his life. The situation changes with the arrival of a middle-aged theatre director Fryderyk, whose distinct behavior traits and aura of detachment from national problems appeal to Witold as crucial for his own self-realization. Fryderyk's unexpected visit fills the narrator with curiosity about "the new beauty and new poetry" beyond the surroundings dominated by war and initiates his association of sexual dynamics with personal freedom (Gombrowicz, *A Kind* 127).

Finding a counterweight to the surrounding forms of patriotism in the new kind of human presence, the narrator begins to rebel against the process of being shaped by convention in the spirit of Gombrowicz's famous dictum: "Let me conceive my own shape. Let no one do it for me" (*Ferdydurke* 32). Studying Fryderyk's appearance, Witold sees him as "isolated from us in that eternal game of his . . . so separate from our collective drama, so disconnected from the discussion 'nation, God, proletariat, art' . . . that I found it restful, it gave me some relief" (*Pornografia* 10). The emphasis on Fryderyk's incongruence with the collective spirit exemplifies the characteristic feature of Gombrowicz's writing, described by Maria Janion as contradistinguishing the Polish and the human (55). The emphasis on Witold's relief at the sight of Fryderyk shifts the overtone of the scene from an ordinary encounter to one in which Fryderyk seduces the narrator with the potential of liberation from the collective void.

Embarking together on a journey to the countryside, described vaguely as related to a business supplying them with livelihood, the narrator begins to fantasize about discovering something sublime behind the visible details of the friend's demeanor. The effect of the sexually charged voyeurism is to reveal the narrator's excitement about the idea of retrieving his autonomy through experience that resists the demands of collective belonging. As noted by Allen James Kuharski, Fryderyk acts as "a catalyst for the release of the sexual fears and repressed desires of those around him" (150). Witold continually marvels at the qualities of the friend's presence, expressing astonishment with something impalpable described as "his singular inner quality" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 11). The emphasis on the "peculiarity" or "silently-shouting impropriety" surrounding Fryderyk's appearance recurs in the narrative to hint at Witold's repressed desire (10). While Fryderyk's body appears to the narrator as alluringly peculiar, the physicality of others strikes him as "alien, brazen . . . crawling and pressing on us, only deepen[ing] my tête-à-tête with him" (10). At the height of his astonishment with the new stimulus, Witold describes the friend as "not an ordinary being but something more rapacious, strained by an extremity" (13). The contrast between Fryderyk's "rapacious" appeal and

the ordinariness of other people in the village creates an implicitly erotic dynamics that feeds into Witold's fascination with the idea of transcending "the deep sense of victimhood and struggle" expected of him as a member of postwar Polish society (Rosenson 150).

As suggested by the contrast between the imprisonment within the collective drama and the sudden animation under the peculiar male presence, Fryderyk's arrival propels the narrator to believe that erotic experience can be a passageway to personal freedom. A promise of liberation evoked by the characters' encounters emerges vividly during Witold's visit to a local Catholic church, a symbol of "an indigenous national tradition and a material embodiment of Polishness" (Jakubowska 50). Throughout the visit, the narrator denounces the mass for its overpowering effects under which "the lurking multiplicity of meanings vanish[es]" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 20). When focusing his gaze on Fryderyk, who sits in the same aisle, Witold discovers that suddenly "a mass turns into an anti-mass," losing both its meaning and redemptive powers (Oklot 270). Using reproductive vocabulary such as "collapsing in a terrible impotence, no longer capable of begetting life," Gombrowicz depicts the disintegration of the mass under the weight of the protagonist's desire (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 22). Empowered by the sight of Fryderyk, the narrator describes his inner experience as a moment of victory over the collectivity: "What victory over the Mass! What pride! As if its abolition was, for me, a longed-for ending of sorts: finally I was alone, by myself, without anyone or anything but me" (24). Under the influence of the friend's presence, Witold experiences a temporary reversal within the hierarchy of power, which creates a promise of liberation by presenting the collective realm, not his private reality, as conquered.

"THE *UNDREAMT-OF*": SEXUAL DESIRE AND JEWISH-AMERICAN BELONGING

Engaging with Nazi occupation in Poland and the socioeconomic oppression of Jews in America, Gombrowicz and Roth, respectively, portray characters who attribute to erotic life a potential to actualize their liberation from the collective realm. Notably, *Portnoy's Complaint* derives the promise of liberation from the positioning of sexual life as the narrator's means to "choose pleasure [for myself] over duty to [my] loved ones"—a symbolic situation where, in focusing the attention on itself, the self becomes an agent shifting priorities and making choices (Roth 85).

Summing up the events of his father's life at the age of thirty-three, Alexander Portnoy struggles with the awareness that "nobody ever really

gave him satisfaction, return commensurate with goods delivered" (6). Far from the suburban world of the socially mobile, upper-class Jews, the narrator's father represents the perspective of the socioeconomically exploited. Selling insurance in Newark's most impoverished neighborhoods, the father receives medals for extraordinary returns, but his superiors' prejudice prevents him from ever obtaining promotion. Throughout his confession to psychiatrist Dr Spielvogel, Alexander Portnoy tries to come to terms with his parent's wish to raise a son into a member of the middle class and rehabilitate the family's social status through a conventional definition of success projected onto a child. At one point during the session, the character asks in the context of his propensity for neurotic behaviors: "Doctor, what is this sickness that I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from pogroms and the persecution?" (37). Portnoy's guilt for not measuring up to paternal hopes meshes with a sense that the extent to which his life follows an inherited structure of history seems disproportional to independent action. Described as "all I really had that I could call my own," the protagonist's erotic life takes a form of resistance against the Jewish milieu, offering space where convention and dominant values can be actively transgressed (33).

Given the need to distance himself from his Jewishness and working-class background, the sphere of sexual life appeals to the narrator as a way to "leave off complaining . . . and go out into the air, and live" (119). The possibility of transgression inherent to this erotic experience represents Portnoy's process of endowing sexual life with the potential to actualize his personal freedom. To escape the image of "a nice Jewish boy" that overshadowed his childhood, Portnoy explores the unruly and boundless nature of desire, the very dimensions that disrupt the projection grounded in the collective structures (37):

> What is he doing to himself, this fool! this idiot! this furtive *boy*! This sex maniac! He simply cannot—*will* not—control the fires in his putz, the fevers in his brain, the desire continually burning within for the new, the wild, the unthought-of and, if you can imagine such thing, the *undreamt-of*. (101)

In fantasizing about the reaction to his sexual adventures, Portnoy uses sexuality to project a vision of himself through the eyes of those who embody the essence of the Jewish custom. Instead of focusing on the character's inner experience, as does Gombrowicz's mass scene to depict the momentary impact of the erotic life on autonomy, Roth operates primarily on the level of the external collective projection. Key to the

promise of freedom here remains the intersection of rule-breaking and physical pleasure. Throughout the book, Portnoy recalls his teenage sexual experience in the context of a realization that taboos could be "so easily and simply broken, confidence . . . given to the whole slimy, suicidal Dionysian side of my nature" (79). In evoking the liberating aspect of the sexual self-discovery, the narrative circles back to Portnoy's impression that the most powerful moments of release from guilt in his life are primarily the moments of transgression tied to the uninhibited erotic life. The narrator claims: "to break the law, all you have to do is—just go ahead and break it! All you have to do is stop trembling and quaking and finding it unimaginable and beyond you" (79). The narrative pits the sphere of erotic life against collective structures by highlighting the narrator's belief that transgressions connected to sexual experience speak directly to the aspects of his class and ethnic backgrounds:

> O America! America! it may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a *shikse* nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love! (165)

In this passage, the structures of the old world symbolized by Portnoy's allusion to Herbert Hoover's 1928 presidential campaign promising "a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage" emerge in contraposition to the object of sexual desire (qtd. in Safire 115). For Portnoy, the allure of interracial relationships and non-Jewish women's media image lies primarily in the distrust of assimilation represented by his parents and their belief that "the only place for a Jew to live is among Jews" (Roth 52). Portnoy's attribution of an emancipatory potential to erotic life emerges from a link between sexual pleasure and defiance of norms such as "marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children, and buying houses, and putting down roots" (100). Ultimately, his association of America with sexual freedom represents a shift from the priorities of the Old World towards the belief in the power of erotic life to actualize personal liberation.

THE DYNAMICS OF (UN)FULFILLMENT

Recognizing erotic life as a pathway to emancipation, the narrators of both novels invest their quest for autonomy in symbolic subjects that overstep the boundaries of collective realms. In *Pornografia*, Witold's

erotic awakening reaches its apex at the sight of local teenagers, Henia and Karol, whose youth appeals to him as untainted by the circumstances of the collective struggle. The figure of "American shikse" constitutes parallel dynamics in *Portnoy's Complaint* as an embodiment of "the inter-marital threat to the survival of Judaism" (Jaher 518). Yet, it is important to note that transgressing the world of postwar American Jewishness offers Portnoy an alternative landscape where the countercultural spirit of the 1960s has already been grounded. If Portnoy's self-discovery is premised on overstepping the boundaries of American Jewishness, Witold, operating in an environment devoid of a countercultural principle, experiences eroticism primarily through the person of Fryderyk. The remoteness of the Polish countryside combined with complex para-rituals as prerequisites for actualizing same-sex desire in *Pornografia* point to the vicarious mode of Witold's erotic experience, constituting a significant difference between the two characters' situations.

The use of the symbolic subjects in the novels invites the reader to consider why the sphere of erotic life corresponds with the characters' rebellion against the collective dynamics, but the promise of liberation mediated by emancipatory moments ultimately cannot be realized. Drawing upon the analysis of classical antiquity which ascribed to sexuality the aspect of "a care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*), Foucault positions sexuality as a component of individual ethics. The author emphasizes a link between sexual activity and the techniques of life that allow one to embark on a new relationship with one's self and others, suggesting that "our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to that of the Greeks, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our modal, personal, private life" (Focault qtd. in Taylor 240). If ethics is something we establish through individual action rather than a finished achievement of religions or legal systems, the project of liberation through sexual life is viable only to the extent it incorporates "intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being" (Foucault, *Hermeneutics* 11). Assuming that the use of pleasure is to be approached with agency that is crucial to ethics, Foucault's proposition is that sexuality offers one an area to exercise an attitude of care for oneself as much as for others.

While Foucauldian understanding of sexuality sees emancipatory potential in eroticism, Gombrowicz's development of *Pornografia*'s plot undermines such trust. The motive of an impossible coupledom in the novel performs the failure of a liberating operation based on a Foucauldian understanding of sexuality. *Pornografia* sees Witold and Fryderyk stage

suggestive situations with hope to arouse Henia and Karol's interest in each other, even though such development is unlikely from the beginning due to the girl's engagement with another man. Resorting to clandestine communication through letters, the adults arrange bizarre events, such as requesting Henia to roll the bottoms of Karol's trousers. Gombrowicz justifies Fryderyk's intrusion in the private reality of the teenagers by describing his role in the novel in terms of "a stage director, even a chemist, who by bringing people together tries to create the alcohol of a new charm" (*A Kind* 128). It is again Fryderyk who arranges a moment of the young people's physical touch and, in cooperation with Witold, makes the scene visible for the girl's father to undermine her engagement. Although the goal of Witold and Fryderyk is to become autonomous from the collective, their failed undertaking to bring Henia and Karol together shows that this desire must remain only a desire. The absurdity and eventual failure of the characters' efforts captures the essence of Gombrowicz's idea of the "interhuman church" with its strictly relational ontology, which rejects the possibility of absolute autonomy and, at most, recognizes a chance to loosen the grip of the national community.

Witold and Fryderyk's staging of the artificial erotic situations exemplifies the phenomenon described by Roland Barthes as "see[ing] the other in the guise of an inert object, like a kind of stuffed doll . . . to shift . . . desire from this annulled object to . . . desire itself" (36). Such power dynamics also underpins Portnoy's sexual encounters as his desire to stage provocative erotic scenarios degrades non-Jewish women, exemplified by Mary Jane Reed, the illiterate daughter of a West Virginia coal miner. In both novels, the promise of liberation through sexual pleasure reveals a problematic degree of manipulation involved in the attempts to bring about the desired erotic conditions. Portnoy disparagingly nicknames the woman "Monkey" and expects her to act on his fantasies, which includes entering a threesome with a prostitute during their vacation in Rome. Confronting Portnoy with "an increasingly powerful sense that she is being dehumanized," the woman, nonetheless, complies with the demands, stimulated by genuine feelings of love (Hayes 106). Given the problematic power dynamics whereby the enforcement of an erotic scenario violates the subject's integrity, Foucault's link between sexuality and "the attitude towards the self, others, and the world" helps to elucidate the failure of both characters' hopes for liberation (*Hermeneutics* 10). The more "embedded, practice-based account of autonomy" proposed by the French thinker positions individual ethics as decisive for one's ability to find freedom in the sphere of sexual activity (Critchley 41). Without attention to the ethical implications of agency, the characters in both novels fallaciously

premise their liberation on the submissiveness of another subject. Thus, it is in the moment of confrontation with the agency of the women and the teenagers that Portnoy and Witold, respectively, become aware of their ultimate inability to become liberated.

The characters' paradoxical inability to acknowledge the autonomy of others within the plan to retrieve their own ultimately prevents them from reaching the desired fulfillment. As she no longer agrees to submit to Portnoy's demands, Mary Jane shifts in his perception from "the fulfillment of . . . lascivious adolescent dreams" to "the girl who has got me all wrong" (Roth 134). Learning about the woman's feelings, the protagonist admits that the unfolding image of female vulnerability spells the failure of his liberation project: "You see, in this Monkey's estimation it was my mission to pull her up from those very abysses of frivolity and waste of perversity and wildness and lust, into which I myself have been so vainly trying all my life successfully to sink" (135). Portnoy's disappointment mirrors the failure of Witold's liberation plan in that they both dismiss the possibility that their objects of desire have feelings beyond the sanction of a preconceived erotic scenario. In *Pornografia*, the teenagers not only remain indifferent to each other but also mirror the dynamics of the narrator's fascination by disclosing the desire to enter the adults' world. Instead of developing a bond with Henia, Karol endeavors to impress his older colleagues and stages similarly provocative situations as Witold and Fryderyk in hope to win their respect. At one point in the novel, the character approaches an old lady in the field and pulls up her skirt during a walk with the adults. A seemingly innocent joke leads Witold to the bitter realization that the two adolescents desire to enter maturity as much as he wants to experience bliss through their youth: "He didn't want to be just 'a boy with a young girl,' but 'a boy with adults,' a boy who is breaking into adulthood. . . what a dark, perverted idea!" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 66). The narrator's ultimate realization is that the teenage fascination with maturity clashes with his private fantasy and, thus, can no longer serve as a driving force of personal liberation.

The link between the sexual dynamics and the unfulfilled promise of liberation allows the authors to dramatize their portrayals of imprisonment within the collective. Towards the end of Gombrowicz's novel, the urge to control other people's behavior is used against Witold and Fryderyk as the local community employs the same techniques of manipulation to enforce their participation in a collective mission. In the final part of the novel, the landowner who offers a shelter to an underground resistance leader, Siemian, learns that the Home Army wants to kill him due to the confidential information he could disclose. The news about the visitor's conflict with the Resistance instantly prompts the landowner to carry

out the murder on his own terms. The process of devising a strategy for killing Siemian resembles "the reconstruction of Witold and Fryderyk's erotic game" as the landowner and his family resort to parallel methods of scenario staging to draft people into their self-appointed mission (Jarzębski 49). Involuntarily involved in the conspiracy and no longer able to pursue his erotic fantasy, Witold realizes:

> Hipolit's tone of voice revealed a lightning-fast change in our relation. I ceased to be a guest, I was in service, stuck with them in harshness, in cruelty that was turning as much against us as against Siemian. But how had he wronged us? All of a sudden, rushing headlong, we had to butcher him, endangering our own necks. (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 143)

Here, the narrator expresses bafflement with a sudden change of his household status as the authoritative tone of the landowner imposes on him the attitude of dedication to a national cause. Through the use of a passive voice in the phrase "stuck with them in harshness" ("*wsadzony wraz z nimi w ostrość*") the narrator presents himself as subject to somebody else's action, which undermines his previous self-image as an agent of change within the dynamics of Henia and Karol's friendship. The pressure on Witold to comply with the collective action parallels his own expectations towards the teenagers to serve as "marionettes in the throes of an elemental force" and fulfil his fantasies regardless of private feelings (139).

The motif of vengeance is also at play when the failed promise of liberation meshes with Portnoy's discovery of his impotence, seen as a punishment for mistreating Mary Jane. The character labels the situation as "The Monkey's Revenge" and self-mockingly imagines himself at a court against the accusation of mental abuse. Portnoy's lack of remorse creates space for feelings of self-pity as he ponders: "Well, why, damn it, can't I have some fun! Why is the smallest thing I do for pleasure immediately illicit—while the rest of the world rolls laughing in the mud" (Roth 225). Ultimately, the recollection of impotence announces the impossibility of moving away from the collective realm:

> And all at once it happens again, I am impaled again upon the long ago, what was, what will never be! The door slams, she is gone—my salvation! my kin!—and I am whimpering on the floor with MY MEMORIES! My endless childhood which I won't relinquish—or which won't relinquish me! Which is it! *Remembering radishes*—the ones I raised so lovingly in my Victory Garden. In that patch yard beside our cellar door. *My* kibbutz. Radishes, parsley, carrots—yes, I am a patriot too . . . only in another place. (271)

Similarly to *Pornografia*, the final section of the book presents an unexpected shift in the protagonist's self-governance, depicted as a direct consequence of mistreating the subject he desired. Dean J. Franco asks in the context of this plot development: "Is it possible that this seemingly transgressive, liberating, boundary-breaking novel, in fact arrives at the lugubrious conclusion that liberation is a ruse?" (52). Implicated in the spirit of the 1960s, the individual failure comments on a broader countercultural dynamic. If democracy perpetuates inequality and segregation, Portnoy's predicament seems to suggest that the revolution emerging on its foundations cannot become a driver of viable change. Announcing "the eclipse of his idealistic quest for a humanism that transcends ethnic and national divisions," the protagonist's conclusive recollection of the Victory Garden grounds him within the realm of childhood and, by extension, the very collective tensions he wished to escape (53).

CONCLUSIONS

Pornografia and *Portnoy's Complaint* depict characters who, burdened with the difficult legacy of their respective collectivities, transfer the desire for autonomy onto the sphere of erotic life. In both novels, the process of endowing erotic dynamics with an emancipatory potential builds a promise of liberation which does not culminate in a permanent change to the characters' predicament. As exemplified by the ethically problematic side of Witold's and Portnoy's erotic pursuits, the unrealized promise of liberation allows the authors to propel the existing tensions between the individual and the collective. Witold's final entanglement in the defense of a collective purpose parallels his desperate attempts to pair the teenagers. Similarly, Roth depicts Portnoy's impotence as an eerie punishment for the mistreatment of Mary Jane, which meshes with his realization of the inability to leave behind the collective realm. Depicting characters disciplined by the same force they believed would bring about their liberation, Gombrowicz and Roth draw upon the unrealized promise of liberation to dramatize their portrayals of imprisonment within the collectivity. Considered alongside *Pornografia*, Roth's novel reveals parallels between both Polish and Jewish-American experience and the two authors' attitudes towards their difficult legacies. For both writers, history marked by the events of the Second World War lies at the heart of the fraught relationship between the individual and the collective, mediating the rejection of a "merely sentimental solidarity" with the native milieu (Kazin qtd. in Gooblar 12).

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Oliwia Majchrowska is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Wrocław. She holds a BA in Comparative Literature from King's College London and an MPhil in European, Latin American, and Comparative Literatures and Cultures from the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include silence in literature, representations of sexuality, and postmodern reinterpretations of detective fiction.
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9599-1401
oliwia.majchrowska@uwr.edu.pl