

Yossarian *Haruspex*: Some Observations on *Catch-22*

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Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.

King Lear, V. ii.

Let me, unlike Joseph Heller, begin at the beginning, and in the first three sentences of *Catch-22* discover three major themes which I shall develop: "love", "liver", and the novel's idiosyncratic and intricately wrought structure.

It was love at first sight.

The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice.¹

Why does the novel begin there, like that? In the first place, is Yossarian in love with the chaplain? Throughout the novel, Yossarian gives no sign of being anything other than uncomplicatedly heterosexual. The function served by the assertion of love is, then, anything but clinical or realistic — it is, of course, mythic, and is thus an index of the novel's distinctive and self-conscious Americanness. This is not to ignore that we are confronted with an assertively — and, perhaps, at the time of the book's initial publication, outrageously — comic opening. Yet the question emerges, is it *merely* an assertive opening, is it mere jejune attention-grabbing, an excrescence unrelated to the bulk of the novel that follows? The answer to these accusations is a firm negative. For "love" is obviously contrasted to all the other motives that permeate the novel — capitalist cupidity (Milo Minderbinder), and particularly the fear necessary in authoritarian structures (the army, McCarthyite America, Imperial America in the 1960s) to keep subordinates subordinate. Love, as Whitman bears witness, is the very essence of democracy and is subversive of authority; while humour and comedy, as Freud testifies, are personally liberating and deeply anti-social. That is why the novel begins as it does, and it proceeds to create and demonstrate the necessity of love and comedy to survival against repressive structures, be they social structures like the

1 London, Jonathan Cape, 1963. All references are to this edition.

army or the state, or literary structures, like the conventionally plotted novel. *Catch-22* is the demonstration of its hero's and its author's quest for freedom from oppressive and repressive forces and forms; reading it may be a comparably liberating experience.

The opening of *Catch-22* suggests the novel's connection with a major — I am tempted to assert that it is *the* major — tradition in the American novel. In this tradition, so convincingly theorised and documented by D. H. Lawrence and Leslie A. Fiedler,² the essential love relationship is one of innocent homosexuality, which may be read as a rejection of civilization and its discontents as symbolized by the matriarchy. Thus, from Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" novels (1823-1841), through the "marriage" of Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick* (1851), through the loving relationship of Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), through William Faulkner's summation of the tradition in *The Bear* (1942), and Norman Mailer's parody of it in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), the myth of personal (male) freedom being found in an innocent homosexual love-relationship has dominated the American literary consciousness. This mythic relationship, by virtue both of its homosexuality and its innocence, asserts the lovers' freedom from the conventions and trammels of American civilization. Thus the opening of *Catch-22* is richly suggestive, and alerts the reader to its not being merely a war novel (just as *Moby Dick* or *The Whale* is not merely a whaling novel) but, as are all the works in the tradition, a radical critique of American culture.³ Yet the opening is only one among many indices of *Catch-22*'s belonging to this tradition. Melville's *Moby Dick* is invoked at the end of the first chapter. Here we meet the colonel who "dwelt in a vortex of specialists", who was visited by a urologist, a lymphologist, and endocrinologist, a psychologist, a dermatologist, a pathologist, a cystologist, and, finally,

2 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1924); Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, (New York, Criterion, 1960).

3 On this topic, see the excellent article by Morris Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties", *Partisan Review*, XLIII (1976), pp. 185-211. See also Lucy Frost, "Violence in the Eternal City: *Catch-22* as a Critique of American Culture", *Meanjin*, XXX (1971), pp. 447-453; Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1975), pp. 83-85.

a bald and pedantic cetologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by a faulty anode in an I.B.M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby Dick* with him.

It is, of course, a joke; but it is not merely a gag, to be laughed at or disapproved of, and passed by. While, like so many situations in *Catch-22*, it may represent an absurd universe, a cosmic joke, it also serves to alert the reader that the island of Pianosa is, like the *Pequod*, a microcosm of the American state, peopled by innocent men who may be doomed in War by their monomaniac captain (or General) or destroyed by the brute force and indifference of Nature. In this context, "the soldier in white" takes on more ample meaning than at first suggests itself. Like so many things in *Catch-22*, "he" appears at three places in the novel (chapters I, XVII, XXXIV). Yossarian disputes about him with Nurse Cramer, who

was touched very deeply by the soldier in white. Her virtuous, pale-blue, saucerlike eyes flooded with *leviathan* tears on unexpected occasions and made Yossarian mad.

"How the hell do you know he's in there?" (XVII my italics)

In chapter XXXIV, Dunbar "screamed and went to pieces" when "the" soldier in white reappeared in the hospital. This apparition, completely encased in bandages, through which fluid flows unaltered from bottle to interchangeable bottle, appals precisely by virtue of its absence of meaning, its nothingness. The reader may not have needed the indicative detail of "leviathan tears" to recall the crucial "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter in *Moby Dick*, in which Ishmael and Melville muse upon the significance of *Moby Dick's* whiteness, and confront the awe-full possibility that its significance may be the illusoriness of the concept of significance:

Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows — a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?

(*Moby Dick*, XLII)

Because of the "dumb blankness, full of meaning" of the White Whale, Ahab prosecutes his "fiery hunt"; because of the "dumb blankness" of the soldier in white, Dunbar "went to pieces"; and it is against the "dumb blankness" of the army, of corporate American life, of the Danbys of the world, that Yossarian must pursue his quest for integrity and freedom, must, by running, give shape and significance to his life — to Life. As an American

hero, Yossarian cannot accept the terms of life symbolized by the soldier in white and offered by the generals — emptiness and moral duplicity must be rejected. Thus he must resist and run and pursue *his* truth; he must, metaphorically, strike through the concealing gauze mask and discover the truth about the soldier in white. He belongs unmistakably to a tradition of American Promethean heroes, perhaps most violently realized in Ahab.

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event — in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond.

(*Moby Dick*, XXXVI)

Heller may, as he has claimed, have made Yossarian an Assyrian, a member of an extinct race, to render him the quint-essential outsider; but in doing so, he has also recreated an archetypal American hero.⁴ The following crucial exchange occurs in chapter XLI, when Yossarian is being interviewed by mysterious, menacing officers who could as easily have stepped out of Kafka's *The Trial*⁵ as from McCarthy's America:

"Where were you born?" . . .

"On a battlefield," he answered.

"No, no. In what state were you born?"

"In a state of innocence."

"No, no, you don't understand."

But Yossarian understands all too well. Joseph K. could never have proffered those answers, never have managed their pragmatism, their faith, their naïveté. Joseph K. does not need to be convinced — hardly to be accused — of his guilt; Yossarian refuses to doubt his innocence. Here is R. W. B. Lewis's account of an American heroic type to which Yossarian belongs:

. . . a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry

4 For documentation of this tradition, see R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964); *The Picaresque Saint* (New York, Lippincott, 1959).

5 Heller said in an interview that Kafka and Samuel Beckett are "two of my most important authors". Heller acknowledges "Kafka's view of the grotesque horror in the world, and Beckett's ironic sense of the absurd". See Alexis Gonzales, "Notes on the Next Novel: an Interview with Joseph Heller", *New Orleans Review*, II (1971), pp. 216-219.

. . . standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources . . . most easily identified with Adam before the Fall.

(*The American Adam*, p. 5)

Yet Yossarian was also "born on a battlefield", and we turn to D. H. Lawrence for testimony about the Americanness of that birth. Long before the American Imperium reached its zenith (or its nadir) in the 1960s, Lawrence found in Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" novels "the essential American soul [which] is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."⁶ While there can be no doubt that the American hero is morally implicated in killing (all those who figure in the texts mentioned at the beginning of this essay are, though one does have to "stretch" a little in the case of Huckleberry Finn), there can equally be no doubt that the hero strives to free himself from implication in his murderous, rapacious, essentially immoral society. His characteristic mode of escape is flight. Not flight *to* any goal, as critical moralists would oblige him, but simply flight *from*, for moral corruption is inherent in civilization itself. Thus the archetypal gesture of American fiction is one of renunciation of society, if not of civilization:

But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.

THE END. YOURS TRULY, HUCK FINN.

Now, Yossarian, like Huck, is "the best man in the group at evasive action" (V). Again like Huck or Saul Bellow's latter-day version of the picaresque saint in his *Augie March*, Yossarian perceives that almost everybody is out to get him and shape him or destroy him: "The enemy . . . is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter *which* side he's on" (XII). Major Sander-son, the unit's psychiatrist and spokesman for its norms, sees through Yossarian — though he fails to see that Yossarian may be morally right.

"The trouble with you is that you think you're too good for all the conventions of society. . . . You're a frustrated, unhappy, disillusioned, undisciplined, maladjusted, young man. . . . You have a morbid aversion to dying. . . . You have deep-seated survival anxieties. . . . Misery depresses you. Ignorance depresses you. Persecution depresses you. Violence depresses you. Slums depress you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you." (XXVII)

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But, after this catalogue of what the psychiatrist sees as his shortcomings, Yossarian — and the reader — decline to accept that he is crazy. “What are you talking about? Why am I crazy? You’re the one who’s crazy!”

Such a confrontation between the inauthentic values of civilization and the authentic ones of the heroic individual self is an archetypal one in American fiction. It is also an archetypal one in the mythology of Christianity, where true values, so many of which figure in the psychiatrist’s denunciation of Yossarian, are decidedly not the values of this world. It is symptomatic of the democratic omnivorousness of American literature that it should absorb the various Old World mythologies — Classical, Christian, and Renaissance — and confer upon them a secular equivalence. Thus the figures of Adam, Prometheus, Faust, and Christ are not only pervasive in American fiction, but any one protagonist may partake of aspects of any one or all of them. The figure of Christ as vessel of the truth, suffering man, and archetypal outcast (i.e. before the Resurrection) vies with the figure of Adam for prominence, and is found in works as apparently unlike as Melville’s *Billy Budd*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Faulkner’s *Light in August*, and Heller’s *Catch-22*.

If it seems peculiar that Yossarian should fall in love with the chaplain at first sight, it is in no way odd that the man of God should love Yossarian, for he has seen him before (though the reader does not discover this until halfway through the book). He has seen him at Snowden’s funeral, and he has seen him as *Christ*. Here is how Yossarian observes the chaplain observing him (and that perspective-at-a-remove is most important) as he sits naked in a tree at Snowden’s funeral, rejecting Milo Minderbinder’s blandishments and his cotton “cotton candy”.

As Yossarian stared, the chaplain elevated his gaze toward Yossarian beatifically, pressed his fingers down over his eyeballs in a manner of affliction, peered upward again toward Yossarian searchingly, and bowed his head, concluding what Yossarian took to be a climactic part of the funeral rite. (XXIV)

Now the reader who has been conditioned to the comic confusions and multiple perspectives of the novel might “take it to be” that the chaplain is adoring Yossarian as Christ, particularly as Yossarian has just said to Milo:

“It’s the tree of life . . . and of knowledge of good and evil, too.”

Milo squinted closely at the bark and branches. “No it isn’t,” he replied. “It’s a chestnut tree. I ought to know. I sell chestnuts.”

It is an error of critical judgment, when reading sophisticated secular twentieth-century fiction, to make simple-minded unilateral connections between passages such as these and their obvious mythic (in this case, Christian) analogues. The fact that the connections are *obvious* is crucial; like Joyce in *Ulysses*, Heller is overtly and knowingly using structures of myth and knowledge, using them comically and parodically (which is not to say that he is not serious), so that, on the Joycean principle of "parallax", Yossarian can both be Christ and not be Christ simultaneously. That apparent paradox is a testimony to the determining force of subjectivist philosophies on modern literature, to the assumption that what you perceive depends on the angle from which you view it. This apparent confusion—but note that while it is a confusion to the chaplain, it is not to Heller—is enunciated in chapter XXXV, where the chaplain relates his vision at the funeral to his *déjà vu* problem:

Was it a ghost, then? The dead man's soul? An angel from heaven or a minion from hell? Or was the whole fantastic episode merely the figment of a diseased imagination, his own, of a deteriorating mind, a rotting brain? The possibility that there really had been a naked man in the tree—two men, actually, since the first had been joined shortly by a second man clad in a brown mustache and sinister dark garments from head to toe who bent forward ritualistically along the limb of the tree to offer the first man something to drink from a brown goblet—never crossed the chaplain's mind.

Now, while that apparently "real" possibility "never crossed the chaplain's mind", it is apparent that other possibilities have crossed Joseph Heller's. Why the details about Milo's "sinister dark garments" (Milo who, as James M. Mellard has pointed out,⁷ "inches" up the tree, "hisses" at Yossarian, and breathes "virtuous [sic] fire"); why does the incident take place on the *third* day after Snowden's death; why the detail about the ritualistic temptation seen as a brown goblet (cf. "Let this cup pass from me" — *Matthew*, xxvi: 39)? The possibility that crosses the reader's mind is that Heller is offering a comic, secularized parody of Christ's temptation by Satan, and of the analogous temptation in the Garden of Eden, and of the Crucifixion. All of which, the sceptic may demur, is a product of a misperception on the part of the unhappy and distressed chaplain. But that objection cannot explain Heller's choice of significant detail, nor

7 For Mellard's Jungian reading of this sequence, see "*Catch-22: déjà vu* and the labyrinth of memory", *Bucknell Review*, XVI (1968), pp. 29-44.

would it take into account the fact that misperception is a structural principle of *Catch-22*.

This parodic epiphany of Yossarian as Christ interrelates with what Yossarian becomes in the narrative. As he moves from the Dantean infernal circles of the Eternal City into the surreal nightmare of Raskolnikov's dream (which is *named* — this analogy also is knowing, parodic; it tells the reader what it is feeding off, after the reader has worried about *déjà vu*; and cf. the end of chapter II), Yossarian "knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a world full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves" (XXXIX). The first analogy takes us back to the exchange with Major Sanderson, and rights the moral balance of that debate — it is the psychiatrist and the army who are insane, Christ and Yossarian who are sane, and that is why the Colonels must try to bribe Yossarian to their side or "disappear" him. Colonel Korn accuses Yossarian of causing the men's morale to deteriorate; Yossarian responds that the colonels are at fault, because they keep raising the number of missions:

"No, it's your fault for refusing to fly them," Colonel Korn retorted. "The men were perfectly content to fly as many missions as we asked so long as they thought they had no alternative. Now you've given them hope, and they're unhappy. So the blame is all yours."

Heller has overtly directed our attention to one Dostoevski novel; we may find covert reference here to another, for Colonel Korn's accusation is exactly that levelled by the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan Karamazov's dream — levelled at the reborn Christ. Of course, as Machiavellians, the Grand Inquisitor and Colonel Korn are right (if morally repugnant); in Yossarian's case, though he may be left with the precarious freedom of running from the knife of Nemesis, he *has* brought hope and disaffection with the system. Witness the chaplain: "Run away to Sweden, Yossarian. And I'll stay here and persevere. I'll nag and badger Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn every time I see them" (XLII). The novel thus approaches its breathless end, and we see why Yossarian would "love" the chaplain, and the chaplain him. For Yossarian has, by example, "saved" the chaplain, just as Huck Finn and Ishmael (to name but two embodiments of the American myths I have been considering) may liberate the reader, and just as Christ may liberate his "readers" by his example — existential or metaphorical, depending on one's beliefs.

Having considered "love" let me turn to Yossarian's "liver". Why should Yossarian's recurring complaint be located in that organ and not another? Two answers suggest themselves: Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn might see it as a revealing complaint, for it falls just short of being jaundice, and one form of this complaint is "yellow" jaundice, and Yossarian is, in the eyes of the Colonels, "yellow", an unpatriotic coward. But that obviously is not how Yossarian sees himself nor how Heller sees him, so there must be another explanation. References to the "liver" pervade the novel—Captain Black exults in the Bologna raid: "That's right, you bastards, Bologna. . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! Eat your livers, you bastards. This time you're really in for it" (XI). When Yossarian thinks he has appendix trouble at the training camp, "a helpful young English intern dropped in to ask him about his liver" (XVIII). As Yossarian, bowed down with the moral responsibility to which the novel leads him, searches the streets of the Eternal City for Nately's whore's kid sister, Captain Black re-appears:

"If I knew this was going to make you so unhappy, I would have come right over and told you, just to make you eat your liver. Hey, where are you going? Come on back! Come on back here and eat your liver!" (XXXVIII)

The final instance in this by no means exhaustive catalogue occurs in chapter XLII:

Major Danby pressed forward avidly with a look of *vulturous* well-meaning. "Yossarian, do what they want and let them send you home. It's best for everyone that way."

"It's best for Cathcart, Korn and me, not for everyone." (my italics)

The second answer to the question why Yossarian has a "liver" complaint is, like the explanation of his "love", not clinical or realistic, but mythic. I referred earlier to Melville's Ahab belonging to an American tradition of Promethean heroes, a tradition of great rebels and nay-sayers. Yossarian also belongs to this tradition. According to Denis Donoghue, nearly everything we feel about Prometheus comes from Aeschylus and Shelley; nearly everything we know of him comes from Hesiod and Apollodorus.⁸ Prometheus, a demi-god, sometimes appears as the creator of mankind, but sometimes only as mankind's benefactor — as

8 For much of what follows in this paragraph, I am indebted to the first chapter of Professor Donoghue's *Thieves of Fire* (London, Faber & Faber, 1973). My version is selective—I have chosen details of the myth appropriate to Heller's much displaced version.

benefactor, he thwarted Zeus's design of ending the human race and starting it all over again in some other form. At the foundation feast Prometheus deceived Zeus by giving him the mere bones of an ox to eat, tricked out with shining fat, while to men he gave the genuine meat. In anger, Zeus refused to give men the fire they needed for their development. But Prometheus stole it, and gave it to men. Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock while Hephaestus drove a wedge through his chest, and every day an eagle swooped upon him and devoured the lobes of his liver, which grew again by night. (One can, surely, detect mythic analogues of the stories of Christ and Adam in that legend.)

Thus, Heller's locating Yossarian's rumoured illness in his liver, having officers exult in the men's "eating their liver", terming the officers "vulturous", serves not to point to Yossarian's cowardice but to his essential courage. For he is chained to the rock of Pianosa; the army does devour his liver (remember the hoary old joke, "Life depends on the liver"); he does rebel against the tyranny of Zeus/the Colonels, running from their vulturous blandishments as much as from the knife of Nemesis; and he is a benefactor, for he does offer the men "genuine meat", or "hope", as the Colonels term it. He is an American Prometheus.

Professor Donoghue addresses himself not so much to the myth of Prometheus as to a modern "Promethean imagination", which he locates in a tendency to "speak of individualism, freedom, pride, the figure of the modern hero, and reality as a mere function of the imagination."⁹ I wish now to address myself to what I called at the beginning of this essay "the novel's idiosyncratic and intricately wrought structure", and suggest how Heller (like his hero) transforms the reader's perception of reality by acts of the imagination. It is evident that the novel does not begin at the beginning; an account of the chronology of *Catch-22* (as opposed to its plot) might read as follows:

- Yossarian at cadet school, Santa Ana, California.
- Avignon mission; Snowden killed.
- Yossarian naked in tree at Snowden's funeral (seen by chaplain).
- Bologna mission.
- Ferrara mission.
- Yossarian in the hospital (met by the chaplain, who agonizes about *déjà vu*).

9 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

- Yossarian's moral crises in "The Eternal City".
- Yossarian rejects the Colonels' "deal".
- Exit Yossarian, running.

Thus the novel provokes the reader to ask why it is not narrated in chronological sequence. At a level of very considerable generalization, the answer is that twentieth-century authors do not regard historical time as the principal determinant of order; as the works of Faulkner, Joyce, and Proust testify, it is subjectively perceived or felt significances that determine fictional structures. It is perhaps symptomatic of the deadline pressures of literary journalism that the reviewers of *Catch-22*, who by 1961 must have been aware of the authors just mentioned, should have responded to so intricately and deliberately structured a novel with accusations of formlessness.¹⁰ We can turn to Heller himself for an account of the pattern:

If one wants to look deeper than people normally do, he would see that nine-tenths of *Catch-22* is organized around three combat missions: the mission to Avignon, the mission to Bologna, and the mission to Ferrara. The first mission is the main one. . . . The three missions have occurred before the time of the opening chapter, and they keep recurring. . . .

I was very much aware that I was creating in the first, oh, four-fifths of the novel the effect of something being chaotic and anarchistic, and yet have the pieces come together much the way William Faulkner does in *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and other works in which he deals with a large body of information presented in tiny fragments and then have the fragments connect toward the end of the book and give the whole picture.

The narrative line in *Catch-22* assumes a forward motion only toward the end of the book when Yossarian decides to desert.¹¹

The Avignon mission is "the main one" because it is on that mission that Snowden is killed. It is the progressive revelation of detail about the truth of what Yossarian saw in Snowden's

- 10 For an account and rebuttal of these charges, see Jan Solomon, "The Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*", *Critique*, IX (1967), pp. 46-57. Further helpful analyses of the patterning of Heller's novel may be found in James M. McDonald, "I see everything twice": the Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*", *University Review* (Kansas City), XXXIV (1968), pp. 175-180; John W. Hunt, "Comic Escape and Anti-Vision: the Novels of Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon", in Nathan A. Scott, Jr (ed.), *Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 87-112; see also Mellard, *loc.cit.*
- 11 Richard B. Sale, "An Interview in New York with Joseph Heller", *Studies in the Novel*, IV (1972), pp. 63-74.

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dying that provides the authentic structure of the novel, as opposed to the inauthentic chronological one (set out above, and traceable in the success story of Milo Minderbinder). The two patterns may be seen as thesis and antithesis, and result in the synthesis of Yossarian's decision to "desert". The authentic plot, then, may be represented thus:

- The Question: "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?" (IV).
- "And Snowden lay dying in the back" (V).
- Yossarian's brief recollection of Snowden's being "cold" (XVII).
- Everyone is trying to kill Yossarian; that is the "secret" Snowden had "spilled" on the mission to Avignon (XVII). The use of "spilled" is apparently metaphorical here; that it is literally true is discovered later.
- "Yossarian lost his nerve on the mission to Avignon because Snowden lost his guts" (XXII). The "secret" is still concealed, and the metaphorical/literal ambiguity preserved.
- "Yossarian climbed down the few steps of his plane naked, in a state of utter shock, with Snowden smeared abundantly all over [him]" (XXIV).
- Yossarian treats the wrong wound (XXX).
- Snowden is "holding his eternal, immutable secret concealed inside his quilted, armor-plate flak suit until Yossarian had finished sterilizing and bandaging the wrong wound on his leg, and then spilling it out suddenly all over the floor" (XXXII). The literal truth of what seemed metaphorical is now all too apparant — so the reader's realization has been gradual but not completely unaware, like the unfreezing ("I'm cold. I'm cold.") of Yossarian's memory. Heller with scrupulous care makes the reader's experience parallel to Yossarian's.
- In chapter XLI we have the whole, terrible story told over five pages. The two plot patterns coalesce, for where there should be morphine, there is a "cleanly lettered note that said: 'What's good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country.'" Memory floods back to Yossarian, and he and the reader suffer the revelation towards which the novel has been moving, and which has utterly determined the structure of the novel:

He forced himself to look again. Here was God's plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared — liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach

and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. . . . Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat . . .

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.

Thus, almost at the novel's end, the reason for its peculiar and intricately wrought structure becomes apparent. Historical time may appear to serve the ends of the Milo Minderbinders of the world, but it is irrelevant and outrageous to the suffering Yossarians. The novel's structure, then, is dominated by that terrible secret revealed in Snowden's death. The novel is literally a drama of haruspication, a divination by the examination of entrails, leading to a discovery that "man is matter" and to that outrageous and justified parodic allusion "Ripeness was all."

Now it is the effect of Heller's radical plotting to convince the reader emotionally that Yossarian's way of seeing and structuring the world is truer than and morally superior to Milo's and the Colonels'. This act of emotional persuasion by aesthetic performance is sustained and endorsed by other major structures — by *déjà vu*, by the joke structures, by inversions of logic, and by the deliquescence of language — all of which are "functions of the imagination" which convert and dominate the reader.

The phenomenon *déjà vu* operates as a structural principle throughout *Catch-22*. It is that "subtle, recurring confusion between illusion and reality that was characteristic of paramnesia" (XX). Like the chaplain, the reader both keeps thinking as things occur that he has read them before (they are, in fact, recurring), and is subject to a gradual revelation of the truth about incidents he has encountered before: for example, why the whore was beating Orr over the head with her shoe, why Yossarian went naked after Avignon, whether the chaplain had seen Yossarian before. Like Yossarian, the reader must be alert "to maintain his perspective amid so much madness", for Heller is not merely asserting that war is madness (anyone could say that) but is creating its madness through the vertiginous lunacy of his plot structures. Or, as a corollary, we may accept Tony Tanner's suggestion that Heller behaves

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with his narrative rather as Yossarian does on the base and in the air: he twists and turns and goes backward at times, straying from the usual formation . . . Heller is not going to get trapped into the deceptive orderliness and misleading coherence of conventional plot structure.

Again,

part of our admiration for Yossarian is for his very considerable nimbleness among the syntactical and terminological absurdities and contradictions which are as thick as flak around him.¹²

That is why the jokes are not merely funny, or gratuitous. Such sequences as the soldier whose name was "Mudd" (which is literally true, as he is dead; "the dead man in Yossarian's tent was simply not easy to live with"); the "Giuseppe" sequence; Orr's saying "you'll have the best stove in the squadron when I'm through" (i.e. when he has "shot through"); serve not merely as gags. They exist as lessons for Yossarian and the reader, both of whom must break through the deceptive structures of conventional and misleading language. What is "Catch-22", after all, if not a verbal trick, a language-trap, a potential prison? Indeed, many of the joke-sequences in the novel are versions of lexical prisons — Major Major's father's joke, Yossarian's marriage argument with Luciana, the Yossarian/Giuseppe sequence, all derive their humour and their threats from being closed systems. Such systems are typified in Yossarian's query and Doc Daneeka's reply (the Doc is himself incarcerated in a prison of paper and red tape):

"They're not going to send a crazy man out to be killed, are they?"

"Who else will go?"

Heller is acutely aware that man may not only be distinguished from the beasts by the power of language, but that the very power of language may be man's worst enemy. If this should appear a paradox in a work of *literature*, it is only an apparent one, for Heller's search — and it is the self-conscious search of many American authors — is for an authentic language, a language free from the deceptions and constrictions of corporate expectations and bureaucratise ("Catch-22"), for example. The capacity of language to delude (and for the delusion to be satisfying, if inauthentic) is demonstrated when Milo meets a rebellious demand for the much bruted share in the syndicate

12 *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1971).

by writing the words "A Share" on a piece of paper. The limitations of language are shown up when Yossarian objects that to say that they are going to "disappear" Dunbar "doesn't make sense. It isn't even good grammar." It might not be good grammar, but Dunbar disappears nonetheless. The running gag about "Washington Irving" implies that if you censor names, then the person ceases to exist. Yossarian's realization that the cry "Police! Help! Police!" is ambiguous and that language is not merely deliquescent but untrustworthy is climactic. Thus, to recapitulate, the novel both seeks to alter the reader's perceptions by its unconventional structure, and to heighten the reader's awareness of the deceptive powers of language — that uniquely human capacity — by its joke structures and logical inversions. It seeks, in short, by an act of the imagination perhaps not to alter the world, but certainly to alter the reader's consciousness of the world.