

# Joseph Heller's "‘Catch-22’ Revisited"

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## “‘CATCH-22 REVISITED,’”

Joseph Heller's suave, chattypiece for *Holiday* magazine, provides a view of the author of *Catch-22*, of his characteristic narrative patterns, and of his conception of the meaning of war. The article recounts Heller's trip with his family through the sites of his war experiences. On one level, it is a family journal, sketching the features of traveling with a family—what the children will not eat or their impatience with yet another museum. On another level, it unfolds the ritualistic “tour of battlefields” (145) that many veterans make. Like other returnees, Heller finds a landscape in which the war remains only in monuments or in the eyes of the observers. As Heller remarks about his return, “it brought me only to scenes of peace and to people untroubled by the threat of any new war” (145). Beneath these two levels, the article tells Heller's core story, that of the death of a child. As climax, this story provides the organizing principle of “‘Catch-22’ Revisited.” It also contains the genotype for all Heller's narratives. Its patterns—simple, rich, formative, and identifying—reveal the distinctive cast of Joseph Heller's imagination.

Little attention need be given to the first narrative level, Heller's descriptions of his family. These accounts are handled with reticence typical of Heller's talk about his personal life. None of the family members are named; they are referred to as “my wife,” “my daughter,” and “my

son.” The details of family travel are only slightly more individualized. For instance, Heller tells of his son’s momentary interest in the trip when he wins eight dollars at a Florence racetrack. A trip to the opera the next night dampens his enthusiasm and returns him to boredom that is alleviated only when returning home is mentioned. Familial indifference becomes the backdrop for Heller’s own memorial journey:

“I’m thirsty,” said my daughter.

“It’s hot,” said my wife.

“I want to go back,” said my son. (53)

Such choral refrains punctuate the narrative, lending the authenticity of the ordinary to Heller’s account. His family’s indifference—their non-story—sets Heller’s own interest in the war in relief.

As his title indicates, Heller’s battlefield tour is literally an act of revisitation. The journey begins in Corsica (the Pianosa of the novel) and moves up the Italian peninsula, more or less approximating the spatial organization of the novel, which in turn reflected the sequence of combat missions that Heller actually flew.<sup>1</sup> As in the novel, Avignon is the last place visited. Heller’s accounts of the journey stress its two levels: the prominent details of his 1944 memories and the present landscape, which has been metamorphosed by peace: “I was man in search of a war, and I had come to the wrong place. My war was over and gone . . .” (53). Heller’s tone betrays his disappointment that the world has not retained the features so prominent in his wartime memories. War’s plenitude—all the richness of experience that provided the narrative impulse for *Catch-22*—is gone. The present journey pales in significance to the past bombing missions, its narrative of family travel merely a debased version of Yossarian’s “epic” journeyings.

Heller recounts his adventures as tourist with the brash, street-wise voice of his heroes Bruce Gold (*Good as Gold*) and King David (*God Knows*). This Heller knows enough not to believe a tourist guide's story about Michelangelo hurling his ax at his statue of Moses in frustration that a statue so life-like would not speak: ". . . I know that if Michelangelo ever hurled an ax at it, Moses would have picked up the ax and hurled it right back" (60). Occasionally, Heller describes his own reactions to what he sees more personally. For instance, he is moved by Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, the "perpetual movement in violent rising and falling, and perpetual drama in its agony and wrath" (60). Given the transience of the Italy of Heller's experience, the attraction of experience made immutable is obvious, particularly when the rendition preserves the action and the turmoil. Then in a characteristic shift of tone, Heller laments that he cannot see the painting whenever he wants; he would put the painting up in his apartment, "[b]ut my landlord won't let me" (60). Heller's readers have heard this voice before and know his penchant for closing an episode with a one-liner.

His accounts of the battlefield sites layer the past and the present, creating a textual palimpsest on which most of the past has been written over. The landscape has been erased of its wartime features, yet thanks to the memory, Heller can read the erasure marks. Thus at the airfield on Corsica, Heller finds:

A lighthouse that had served as landmark for returning planes left no doubt we had the right place, but there was nothing there now but reeds and wild bushes. And standing among them in the blazing sunlight was no more meaningful, and no less eccentric, than standing reverently in a Canarsie lot. (52)

Revisitation is always fraught with difficulty, in that what one hopes to find is marked chiefly by its absence. For all Heller's or a reader's desires, Corsica or Pianosa or even *Catch-22* cannot be finally revisited. Thus at every stop on the tour, Heller notes differences: the new bridge at Poggibonsi (one of the few locations that did not figure prominently in the novel); civilian Rome where Heller and Yossarian took R & R ("I don't think the Colosseum was there then, because no one ever mentioned it" [59]); or the tourist Avignon in which the Hellers' hotel abuts a bordello. Recounting such differences, Heller is genial and nostalgic, but ineffably sad that despite his memorial efforts the past recedes out of reach like Gatsby's Daisy.

At odd moments, Heller does find reminders of his war, and his narrative preserves them as oases in a peacetime world. The bridge at Poggobonsi has been replaced, but the hole in a nearby mountainside where the young Heller dropped his bombs too late to hit the target is still there. Heller's insistence in inserting the memory of this bombing run into the narrative becomes his own act of wartime preservation. His mistake remains—and thanks to his narrative will remain—more permanent than the landscape of war. In Bologna, Heller also encounters the war in a woman's reminiscences. She was in the Bologna train station when it was decimated by American bombers: "She could not distinguish the rubble of the railroad station from the rubble of the other buildings that stood nearby. . . . And the thought that terrified her—she remembered this still—was that now she would miss her train . . ." (56). The woman's memory—in the perverseness of human recollection—preserves the incidental detail, making it the focal point for the experience. The war itself stays at the remove of memory, "so far in the past" (56).

In "'Catch-22' Revisited," Avignon occasions the narrative anti-climax, the obverse of the climactic Avignon

mission in *Catch-22* in which Snowden is killed and Yossarian is initiated into the lessons of mortality. Heller prepares the reader for the approach to Avignon much as he does in the novel itself. He describes the details of the missions over Avignon: the first flight when he saw his first plane shot down and the second when the copilot “went a little berserk” (56).<sup>2</sup> As in the novel, details come out intermittently. Prefatory to his actual entrance to Avignon, Heller relates his own experiences taking care of the wounded gunner in his plane—the seminal experience for the Snowden death scene. The episode is narrative by ellipsis, in which what is omitted is as telling as what is recounted: “I went to visit him in the hospital the next day. He looked fine. . . . But I was in terrible shape; and I had twenty-three more missions to fly” (142). Again, Heller deflects the terrifying into the humorous. As the joke confirms however, Heller was himself wounded over Avignon, albeit psychically rather than physically. After the exuberance of his initial months in combat, 21-year-old Heller would take a first aid kit on all his subsequent missions and would vow never to fly again after the war (Weatherby 7). In “‘Catch-22’ Revisited,” Heller’s statement that he is in terrible shape means more than it says. Revisitors to *Catch-22* already know this. Like Heller, they know “*There was the war, in Avignon, not in Rome or Ile Rousse or Poggibonse or even Ferrara . . .*” (142). But that was then, in 1944. On his present journey, he finds no war there, nor anyone to share his war with. Only the hotel with the bordello behind it merits a place in the narrative now.

No Heller reader will be surprised though, when Heller does find the war. “[I]t was in neutral little Switzerland, after I had given up and almost lost interest, that I finally found, unexpectedly, my war” (145). As in Snowden’s death, the wounds of war are never where they seem. In a chance meeting with a Frenchman who stops the Hellers

from boarding the wrong train, Heller discovers his war. The man impulsively begins talking about his son who has been seriously wounded in the head and now cannot take care of himself, nor go anywhere alone; his life has become a living death. In the son, Heller has indeed found his "war." His war is about children maimed or dying young. This war brings us to the third level of Heller's narrative.

Readers of *Catch-22*, *We Bombed in New Haven*, *Something Happened*, and *God Knows* will find Heller's choice in making the man's story the climax of "'Catch-22 Revisited'" entirely predictable. The story of dying young—that is Heller's story, the story that he must tell over and over again.<sup>3</sup> It is as crucial to his imagination as the story of youthful aspirations is to Fitzgerald's, or the blacking factory is to the imagination of Dickens. Because this version contains the pattern that appears in his novels as well, it is worth quoting in its entirety.

He began telling us about his son, and his large eyes turned shiny and filled with tears.

His only boy, adopted, had been wounded in the head in the war in Indochina and would never be able to take care of himself. He could go nowhere alone. He was only thirty-four years old now and had lain in the hospital for seven years. "It is bad," the man said, referring to the wound, the world, the weather, the present, the future. Then, for some reason, he said to me, "You will find out, you will find out." His voice shook. The tears were starting to roll out now through the corners of his eyes, and he was deeply embarrassed. The boy was too young, he concluded lamely, by way of apologizing to us for the emotion he was showing, to have been hurt so badly for the rest of his life. (145)

The narrative focuses attention on the son, but his story is left curiously incomplete. Or rather since the son's living death cannot provide further narrative complication, the story shifts to become that of those around him. The inconsolable grief and the tears are the Frenchman's, but in the retelling they become Heller's as well. Opened and closed by tears, the tale is one of grief.

Tears are also the figure for the story that Heller wants to tell but can only announce, never bringing it to consummation. Telling this untold story would necessitate finding meaning in the death of a child. For Heller, the Frenchman's tale approximates the meaning of the untold story: "It is bad," the man said, referring to the wound, the world, the weather, the present, and the future." As quotation gives way to interpretation, Heller transforms the man's tale. In Heller's interpretive transformation, the son participates in the realm of myth and stands between the temporal and quotidian and the eternal and transcendent. In this mediating position of myth, the child story not only illuminates the ordinary—the world of weather and future—but also holds the possibility of transcendent meaning. Repeating the man's word, "you will find out, you will find out," Heller signals his understanding of the story, even if he cannot incarnate it with his own words.

Telling is the crucial concern here, as it is in his novels. If the story could be told, it could gain substantiality of the word.

"Why was he crying?" asked my boy.

"What did he say?" my daughter asked me.

What can you tell your children today that will  
not leave them frightened and sad?

"Nothing," I answered. (145)

As this conclusion demonstrates, Heller can and cannot relate the man's tale, can and cannot relate his own. The

family again becomes the chorus, still outside Heller's story. Throughout the trip, Heller has wanted his family to share his Europe, his war, his memories and experience. And now he cannot tell them what they want to know or paradoxically what he wants to tell them. The curious penultimate line is deliberately left ambiguous: "What can you tell your children today . . . ?" Whose line, whose question, is it? No answer is given. The line's meaning, however, is not ambiguous, for it identifies the dangers of telling children what is in fact their own story. Heller's "nothing" speaks to these difficulties, but it also betokens a larger difficulty—that the child story is as untellable as it is tellable.

The child story reappears at the end of the rest of Heller's work, controlling each narrative as it has controlled "'Catch-22' Revisited." In *We Bombed in New Haven*, Captain Starkey must tell and retell each newly named version of his son that he will die on the next bombing mission. But, of course, he does not really tell his son, or rather Starkey seeks to undercut the story that he has just told. Turning to the audience at play's end, he shouts, "There has never been a war. Nobody has been killed here tonight. It's only . . . make-believe; it's a story . . . a show" (195-96). In the ending of *Something Happened*, Slocum finally calls back the details of the accident in which he killed his son, but concludes the recollection, as the accident itself, with the plea, "Don't tell my wife" (252). In a reversal of the pattern, *Good as Gold* closes with Bruce Gold standing at his mother's grave hoping for a message which he cannot find. The death of another "child," his brother Sid, has brought him to the grave. *God Knows* concludes with King David yearning for a God who will understand and make understandable the grief he feels for his dead sons: "I feel nearer to God when I am deepest in anguish" (381). David's hope for the transcendent mirrors

Heller's own. Heller's most recent novel, *Picture This*, varies the pattern by concluding with the death of Socrates, but not its meaning. In the narrator's mordant observation of its significance, "The death of no person is as important to the future as the literature about it" (350).

There is no reason to think that future Heller novels will not continue to tell the dead child's story and no reason to think that Heller will not continue to wrestle with the problem of "'Catch-22' Revisited," the story which moves him, which impels him to tell the story which he cannot tell.<sup>4</sup> It is after all a story of death, not life, and the death of a child—if not rendered in the transcendent myths of religion—ends, without the consolation of the end. So Heller will continue to revisit *Catch-22*, the place of "[his] war," and to enact the ritual of telling, not telling, and suppressing the telling of the death of children.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Heller's manuscripts and working papers for *Catch-22* include material on his war experience. Among these papers is a list of events while he was in the service on Corsica, including the missions he flew. This material is available in the Special Collections Department of the Goldfarb Memorial Library at Brandeis University. I am grateful to the curator, Mr. Victor Berch, for allowing me to work with this material.

<sup>2</sup>Of the many interviews alluding to Heller's actual war experiences, see in particular Sam Merrill, "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," *Playboy* June 1975: 60+ and Weatherby (cited).

<sup>3</sup>Heller himself is aware of the way in which the death of children figures at the end of his narratives: "Death is always present as a climactic event that never happens to the protagonist but affects him profoundly. I think I'm drawing unconsciously from experience for inspiration. The child, the dependent child or sacrificed child, is always there. I would think that the death of my father when I was about five years old had much to do with that. . . . But it leaves me very sensitive to the helplessness of children and the ease with which they can be destroyed or betrayed, deliberately or otherwise. In each of my books, when the key death takes place, there's a great deal of pain and tenderness involved" (Flippo 51). See also Ruas 163.

<sup>4</sup>Readers will have the opportunity to revisit *Catch-22* along with Joseph Heller, for he has signed a contract with G.P. Putnam's Sons for a sequel (Edward McDowell, "'Catch-22' Sequel by Heller," *New York Times* 8 April 1987: C19).

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