

Time, Structure, and the Search for Continuity in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

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Abstract

This paper concerns Joseph Heller's novel of World War II, *Catch-22*. On its appearance in 1961, the book met with much adverse criticism for what was usually seen as its disorganised form. It is the aim of this essay to present *Catch-22* as a carefully designed fiction, and to establish some of the serious purposes behind Heller's deliberately disorienting structure. By way of an analogy with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Heller's unconventional treatment of time, in particular, is shown to reinforce some of the novel's main thematic concerns. Finally, an attempt is made to redefine the book's central impact. On the strength of the disrupted time-scheme of *Catch-22*, the novel is viewed as an early expression of the recent interest shown in the idea of discontinuity in contemporary experience.

“He must be getting delirious ... He keeps saying the same thing over and over again.” (Yossarian’s ‘brother’ in **Catch-22**)

The machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,- and at the same time. (Laurence Sterne, **Tristram Shandy**).

The early reviews of Joseph Heller’s **Catch-22** (1961) revealed as wide a diversity of response as had been seen in America since the appearance of J.D. Salinger’s **The Catcher in the Rye** ten years before. Thus, while Nelson Algren was praising Heller’s novel as “the best American novel ... in years”¹, Whitney Balliett, in the **New Yorker**, could see little in the book except “a debris of sour jokes, stage anger, dirty words [and] synthetic looniness.”² There was one area of agreement, however, concerning the book’s organisation and structure, which was dismissed variously as confused, disorganised, and monotonous. Unimpressed, Norman Mailer found the novel “like yard goods, one could cut it anywhere.”³ Robert Brustein described the book as “as formless as any picaresque epic”⁴, while Joseph Waldmeir, a full three years after the publication, attacked its complexity as “superficial” and its “apparent repetitiveness [as] unfortunately only too real.”⁵

What caused most critics to complain of Heller’s lack of structural control was the novel’s discontinuous time-scheme, a system depending on the transition from one episode to another in defiance of conventional chronology, and which involves the repeated recapitulations of certain key events. For the most part, the narrative stream of the novel is in a continual state of flux, presenting a pastiche of image and action by the assimilation of past events into the fictional present. There is the sense of a surface narrative which gets nowhere (at least, until the final climactic chapters building up to Yossarian’s desertion), which circles in endless and frequently disorienting repetition. This structural unorthodoxy, of course, came as a flagrant breach of the conventions pursued by the more traditionalist writers of war fiction, a genre traditionally - if paradoxically - reliant on the orderly and sequential progression from battle to battle, from death to death, as authors have striven to impose a comprehensible fictional order on the ultimate human chaos. This has been true even of those novelists (James Jones and Norman Mailer are examples) who have perceived the fundamental psychical dislocation at the centre of the war experience.

It was left to Jan Solomon to restore some of the balance in favour of Heller as a novelist deeply concerned with the problem of fictional design. In an article written in 1967, Solomon argued that **Catch-22** depends for much of its effect on its structural idiosyncrasies. In the course of his explication, he establishes several major points: that “behind what appear to be merely random events lies a careful system of time-sequences involving two distinct and mutually contradictory chronologies” (these concern Yossarian and Milo Minderbinder, the tycoon mess officer); that “by

manipulating the points at which the different systems cross, Heller creates a structural absurdity enforcing the absurdity of character and event"; that Heller sustains "ever-increasing tension through the narrated order, not the actual chronology, of events"; and that "Yossarian, like many other anti-heroes of modern fiction from Leopold Bloom to Moses Herzog, lives in a world dominated not by chronological but by psychological time."⁶

Solomon has since been challenged on various of his conclusions (mainly on his assertion that Heller's chronology is literally impossible), but even his most vociferous critics have had to concede that some discrepancies in the novel's time-scheme remain irreconcilable.⁷ In an important sense, it no longer seems to matter very much that the chronology of *Catch-22* may actually be illogical in some details, when the nightmare world at war presented in the novel is itself consistent only in its duplicity, injustice, and inhumanity. Indeed, through his disrupted time-scheme, Heller challenges the reader to make sense if he can of a totally illogical world and invites us to share his perception of the general dislocation to which man's contemporary experience has been subjected. Solomon's article retains its place in subsequent *Catch-22* criticism for its early demonstration that the structural irregularities of the novel are not mere haphazardry, but the result of a complex and organised design, and that one of the main purposes of that design is a more acute psychological verisimilitude.

II

In the construction of *Catch-22* Heller faced many of the problems concerning the role of time in the novel which met Laurence Sterne two centuries earlier in *Tristram Shandy*. Like Heller, Sterne had been censored for the apparent lack of structure and design in his novel, until critics like Theodore Baird, A. A. Mendilow, and Henri Fluchere⁸ showed that Sterne had been assiduous in providing an accurate historical and chronological background for his work. Baird in particular was concerned with reconstructing that historical time-sequence out of various clues (like the dates and venues of Uncle Toby's battles), which Sterne inserts from time to time into the narrative. It is possible to achieve a similar reconstruction in *Catch-22*, by a compilation of data concerning the sequence of raids and the rising number of missions to be flown by the airmen before they can be rotated home on leave. Given that both writers begin with a definite and formal time-scheme, they then set about disrupting traditional narrative sequence by means of time-shifts, or digressions. For the first two-thirds of

Catch-22, this device controls the narrative method generally. Of greatest relevance here, bearing **Tristram Shandy** in mind, is what Heller does once an initial time-shift away from the fictional present has been made. This concerns the involutions in time that can take place within each digression, the way a major digression is liable to subsequent refraction, producing a series of tangential digressions, each involving a potential move backwards or forwards in time.

In order to present this analogy in its simplest terms, we may compare two passages, one from either work, which typify the common technique. In his **Time and the Novel**, Mendilow has given a thorough explication of Sterne's use of the time-shift in the first book of **Tristram Shandy**. He demonstrates that the quasi-autobiographer (that is, Tristram himself) manoeuvres his narrative back and forth through time between dates as far apart as 1651 and 1759, and that the digressive method whereby these changes are engineered is founded largely on the associations of ideas in Tristram's mind. To take a different example from elsewhere in the novel, we may consider the scene, in chapter twenty-nine of Volume III, where we learn of Walter Shandy's desolation on hearing of the unfortunate accident to his new-born son's nose. This scene takes place, historically speaking and according to Tristram himself, on November 5th, 1718. At this point the narrative is interrupted by Tristram, who feels obliged to account for his father's distress: "To explain this," he says, "I must leave him upon the bed for half an hour, - and my uncle Toby in his old fringed chair sitting beside him."⁹ Without any introduction, the next chapter plunges into a conversation between Tristram's great-grandfather and his wife. Thus, a move backwards in historic time has been achieved, caused by associations in Tristram's consciousness of the word Nose, since Tristram's great-grandmother is seen to be objecting to the shortness of her husband's nose. Next, the need to define that article carries us forward in time, beyond the date of Tristram's birth, to a debate between Tristram and Eugenius over matters of definition. We are then returned to Tristram's great-grandparents, and then, again through the idea of the nose, forward again to a scene involving Tristram's grandparents and the jointure they must pay to the long-lived great-grandmother. The transition between the two historical periods, and incidentally between two chapters, is achieved thus:

My great-grandfather was convinced.
He untwisted the paper, and signed
the article.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

What an unconscionable jointure, my dear, do we pay out of this small estate of ours, quoth my grandmother to my grandfather. My father, replied my grandfather, had no more nose, my dear, saving the mark, than there is upon the back of my hand.

Tristram interposes with:

Now, you must know, that my great-grandmother outlived my grandfather twelve years; so that my father had the jointure to pay, a hundred and fifty pounds half-yearly ... (Sterne, 1968: 226)

From here we are taken back to a discussion of Tristram's father and the question of heredity. After an interlude in which we overhear Didius Tribonius and Tristram discussing his father's stubbornness in opinions, we are led, via Walter's theory on noses and Slawkenbergius's Tale, back to the prostrate Walter Shandy. Thus, we are returned to our initial temporal location after a sequence of digressions covering apparently random events and phases, which can either precede or antedate our point of departure at Tristram's birth. Fluchere (1965: 45) has commented on this digressive technique: "so one digression leads to another, each one proceeds by a series of expansions, or by spontaneous branchings-out even inside a theme, which a memory, an idea, sometimes even a word, will suddenly provoke."

Our point of reference in **Catch-22** concerns the tenth chapter, which opens with the statement that "Clevinger was dead", thus locating the incident as having taken place some time between Yossarian's two hospital visits with the required number of missions at 38 and 45 respectively. Heller (1967: 107) remarks upon the mysterious circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Clevinger's plane in a cloud, and goes on to observe:

The disappearance was astounding, as astonishing, certainly, as the Grand Conspiracy of Lowery Field, when all sixty-four men in a single barrack vanished one payday and were never heard of again.

In the narrative stream the two incidents are linked by the fact of the disappearance, effecting a time transition, or digression, which takes us to a point at least one year prior to Clevinger's disappearance. At Lowery Field, where Yossarian was a private, we meet ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, and we are told of the incident in which Wintergreen struck open a waterpipe while digging and the word spread that it was oil:

Soon every man who could find a shovel was outside digging frenziedly for oil. Dirt flew everywhere; the scene was almost like the morning in Pianosa seven months later after the night Milo bombed the squadron with every plane he had accumulated in his M & M syndicate ... (Heller, 1967: 109)

In this case, Heller has been more helpful than Sterne in providing us with exact information as to the length of the time-lapse involved. From this point Heller manipulates his narrative through a series of associations to a point antecedent to Milo's bombing of the squadron. We learn that Chief White Halfoat was transferred from Lowery Field to Pianosa as a result of

the 'oil' strike, and that the Chief came as a replacement for a Lieutenant Coombs, who had been killed with Kraft:

Yossarian felt guilty each time he remembered Kraft, guilty because Kraft had been killed on Yossarian's second bomb run, and guilty because Kraft had got mixed up innocently also in the Splendid Atabrine Insurrection that had begun in Puerto Rico on the first leg of their flight overseas and ended in Pianosa ten days later with Appleby striding dutifully into the orderly room the moment he arrived to report Yossarian for refusing to take his Atabrine tablets.

At this stage, then, we are on Pianosa during the first days of Yossarian's stay, at a point preceding the deaths of Kraft and Clevinger as well as Milo's bombing of the squadron. There are references to the odd behaviour of Major Major, to the reliable Sergeant Towser, and to Appleby, who left Major Major's tent "wondering if perhaps Yossarian were not the only man privileged to wear an officer's uniform who was crazy." The epithet "crazy" leads, through Sergeant Towser, to the case of Mudd, the "dead" man in Yossarian's tent, killed at Orvieto with the missions at thirty-five. In turn, we learn that Mudd left Yossarian's tent "all contaminated with death ... in the same way that all was contaminated with death the very next week during the Great Big Siege of Bologna. (Heller, 1967: 112) Again helpful with the duration of the time-lapse, Heller leaves us, at the close, through the idea of contamination, at a point antecedent to that which opens the chapter and the novel itself.

In such a way, Heller provides an itinerary of events, apparently at random and completely unconnected, by a method of transition strongly reminiscent of Sterne's technique. The only major qualification that need be added is that, in *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne is careful to give the associationist theory its greatest flexibility by allowing the technique to function solely through the consciousness of the narrator, Tristram. In this way, Sterne the omnipotent author may retire behind the persona of Tristram the chronicler and allow the latter's peculiar thought processes to have free rein with the material. Heller follows this practice only in part, for when events are not linked through Yossarian's consciousness, we see Heller taking a more obtrusive part in plot manipulation, as in most of the last quotation, where it is clearly Heller the author rather than any character creation who controls the time-shifts. This is possibly the result of certain modifications that Heller carried out on an early version of the novel in which, according to Frederick Karl (1964: 141), the narrative was "typically Joycean ... full of intermittent streams of consciousness and involutions of time."

In defending the erratic and disjointed structure of *Catch-22* Vance Ramsey (1966) had this to say:

The abrupt shifts in time and event are ... not flaws of the book; rather they are central to its technique. These are not really flashbacks, because they are not related either to a character's specific remembrance nor are they often

explicitly related to the situation which they interrupt. One of the functions of these abrupt time-shifts ... is to wrench the characters out of the traditionally ordered, time-bound context of the novel. Events exist primarily not in any cause-and-effect or chronological relation to one another but simultaneously. This does not mean that time has been escaped in the novel; on the contrary, it has become more personal and hence more crucial. Because of the nearness of the book's characters to death, time is literally running out on them.

Although it may be shown that at least some of these time transitions are in fact "related ... to a character's specific remembrance", Ramsey is correct in emphasizing the impression of simultaneity and immediacy achieved through the technique in *Catch-22*. In commenting on Sterne's digressive technique, Mendilow (1952: 182) says:

The book [Tristram Shandy] consists almost exclusively of constituted scenes and discriminated occasions, presented without introduction or reference to their calendar relation to preceding or succeeding scenes. This is the true time-shift, and it emphasizes the effect of every part as a present, not as relatively past or future.

With the reservation that Heller often indicates precisely the "calendar relation" of events, Mendilow's judgment can be applied to *Catch-22*. Although the whole action of *Catch-22* is seen, grammatically speaking and from the point of view of the narrator, as having taken place in the past, there remains a similar sense of immediacy to that which Mendilow mentions, achieved partly by the abrupt juxtaposition of scenes, and partly through a dialogue which is generally given in the present. In Sterne's work, this design serves to underline the point he wishes to make concerning the psychology of Tristram, a system which orders past events into a uniform present, regardless of historical relativity, thereby suggesting the jostling of all past events in a continuous state of presentness in Tristram's mind.

In *Catch-22*, Heller sets out to achieve a similarly close relation between time, structure, and theme. Among other things, the overall structural irregularity mirrors a collective state of mind, a condition in which the present moment, not the past or future, is of critical importance. For Yossarian and his comrades, survival is paramount. They live in the present, for the present, and always in tense proximity to death. In this sense, it is indeed possible to see the time-shifts not as 'flash-backs', for their total experience becomes merged into an overriding preoccupation with the present. Past events are recalled in the narrative with a vigour and freshness which places each scene before us in the most vivid terms, so that we are usually unaware of the 'pastness' of events in relation to other events in the novel. This impression of presentness largely destroys considerations of relative time, and has given rise to the confusion which some early critics felt.

This disruption of our customary understanding of time is reflected, for example, in Lieutenant Dunbar's construction of a personalised temporal system, within which unpleasant experiences are to be savoured since they

appear to cause time to pass more slowly. Dunbar "loved shooting skeet because he hated every minute of it and the time passed so slowly." "You're inches away from death every time you go on a mission," he tells an incredulous Clevinger. "How much older can you be at your age? A half minute before that you were stepping into high school, and an unhooked brassiere was as close as you ever hoped to get to Paradise. Only a fifth of a second before that you were a small kid with a ten-week summer vacation that lasted a hundred thousand years and still ended too soon. (Heller, 1967: 40) Dunbar's is basically a retreat to some privately ascertainable reality, given that the institutional mind of the Air Corps itself ignores the accepted referential systems. Thus, during Clevinger's disciplinary cross-examination by the chairman of the Action Board, we find the following exchange:

"Precisely what did you mean, Cadet Clevinger, when you said we couldn't find you guilty?"

"I didn't say you couldn't find me guilty, sir."

"When?"

"When what, sir?"

"Goddammit, are you going to start pumping me again?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Then answer the question. When didn't you say we couldn't find you guilty?"

"Late last night in the latrine, sir."

"Is that the only time you didn't say it?"

"No, sir. I always didn't say you couldn't find me guilty, sir. What I did say to Yossarian was--"

"Nobody asked you what you did say to Yossarian. We asked you what you didn't say to him. We're not at all interested in what you did say to Yossarian. Is that clear?" (Heller, 1967: 81-82)

It is a comic scene, but one fraught with horrifying possibilities, for the nonplussed Clevinger is coerced into specifying a time that never was, into locating a non-event. What more fundamental subversion of our habitual sense of continuity may be imagined? But it is a form of discontinuity perfectly in keeping with Heller's vision of the contemporary world, which is also subject to linguistic and conceptual discontinuities. "How many winners were losers," Yossarian wonders on his nightmare walk through the streets of Rome, "successes failures, rich men poor men? How many wise guys were stupid? How many happy endings were unhappy endings? How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupt ... How many straight and narrow paths were crooked paths? How many best families were worst families and how many good people were bad people?" (Heller, 1967: 421-422)

III

Another of the charges levelled against Heller's construction of *Catch-22* concerned its repetitiveness. Solomon (1966-1967: 49) took up this theme

when remarking upon the final, fully detailed account of the death of Snowden, the young radio-gunner killed on the fateful mission to Avignon:

In Yossarian's final insubordination, his desertion, chronology and the narrative order of events combine. The chronological order of events has brought Yossarian into dangerous conflict with Colonels Cathcart and Korn. Thus, present events motivate him. But past events are equally forceful, for at this point in the novel the death of Snowden is narrated in full and horrible detail. Snowden's death occurred months before, but it is described at the end of the novel so that it may have its ultimate effect in the ultimate action of the novel, the desertion. There is, of course, psychological validity; past events can motivate present actions, but more important is the consistent denial of the typical novelistic convention which locates causes in immediately antecedent events.

Although Solomon's contentions are well-founded, he does not account fully for the real value of the scene in its context, that is, in the light of the numerous repetitions of the event injected into the narrative before this point in the novel. He fails to substantiate his earlier claim that Heller achieves an "ever-increasing tension through the narrative order" of events, and he appears also to minimise the symbolic and thematic function of the recurring image in the context of Yossarian's own struggle to extricate himself from the insane Catch-22 world of the Air Corps and his quest for a more meaningful order of things.

The re-iteration of Snowden's death reinforces the novel's underlying theme of violence and mortality; it serves as an emblem of devastation and doom, and, simultaneously, through the greater degree of detail in which it is presented on each new appearance, keeps time with the mounting crisis facing Yossarian - which is whether he should continue to fly and so to expose himself to the same fate Snowden has suffered, or to survive by deserting. Snowden's death is alluded to on nine separate occasions before the completed version is revealed; each time Snowden enters the narrative we are given additional information, until, in the final scene, we have the gruesome image of the gunner's "liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch." When we first hear of him, in a question posed, significantly, by Yossarian during one of Clevinger's educational sessions ("Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?") we are told only that "Snowden had been killed over Avignon when Dobbs went crazy in mid-air and seized the controls away from Huple." (Heller, 1967: 35-36) Gradually, the nature of Snowden's wound, his manner of dying, and Yossarian's peculiar involvement in the horrific situation are all established. The references are by no means casual in their placing, being interpolated into the narrative at strategic points so as to create a rhythmic, symbolic counterpoint to Yossarian's mounting state of agitation. The placing of the final revelation concerning Snowden im-

mediately prior to Yossarian's desertion gives added impetus to Yossarian's flight and underscores the indelible impact of the event on him. Where the real significance in Heller's method lies is in the close association between Yossarian and his dying comrade, because the experience is essential not only to the consistency of Yossarian's behaviour but also to one of the main ethical imperatives of the novel.

In order to forge this relationship between Yossarian and Snowden, Heller has the scene of Snowden's death recalled via Yossarian's consciousness, by having it insistently invade his thoughts. This, of course, involves the operation of the memory, and in this way the recurring image suggests the surfacing of a remembered (but possibly suppressed?) incident in Yossarian's mind, a terrifying re-enactment given immediate form and substance by the real horror the scene continues to evoke for Yossarian. The effect is achieved in various ways. At one point we see Yossarian considering the advantages of hospital life:

He could relax in the hospital, since no one there expected him to do anything. All he was expected to do in the hospital was die or get better, and since he was perfectly all right to begin with, getting better was easy. Being in the hospital was better than being over Bologna or flying over Avignon with Huple and Dobbs at the controls and Snowden dying in back. (Heller, 1967: 170)

Here the image is only a fleeting one. Later, Yossarian begins to think of all his dead comrades:

There were no more beautiful days. There were no easy missions. There was stinging rain and dull, chilling fog, and the men flew at week-long intervals, whenever the weather cleared. At night the wind moaned. The gnarled and stunted tree trunks creaked and groaned and forced Yossarian's thoughts each morning, even before he was fully awake, back on Kid Sampson's skinny legs bloating and decaying ... After Kid Sampson's legs, he would think of pitiful, whimpering Snowden freezing to death in the rear section of the plane. (Heller, 1967: 355)

Elsewhere, Yossarian is seen struggling for his life with Nately's whore shortly after Nately's death:

"Please," he urged her inarticulately with his arm about her shoulders, recollecting with pained sadness how inarticulate and enfeebled he had felt in the plane coming back from Avignon when Snowden kept whimpering to him that he was cold, he was cold, and all Yossarian could offer him in return was "There, there. There, there," (Heller, 1967: 405)

On another occasion, Yossarian wakes in hospital feeling cold:

He was cold, and he thought of Snowden, who had never been his pal but was a vaguely familiar kid who was badly wounded and freezing to death in the puddle of harsh yellow sunlight splashing into his face through the side gunport ... "I'm cold," Snowden said softly.

"I'm cold." (Heller, 1967: 446)

Heller recalls the vision of Snowden through a variety of stimuli-prompted

by an emotion (Yossarian's feeling of helplessness when trying to placate the whore), through a physical sensation (his coldness), or by a suggestive mixture of sight and sound (the creaking tree trunks).

In one sense, the repetition of Snowden's death represents Yossarian's struggle to overcome the fallacious world fabricated by the Air Corps and to restore contact with the authentic bases of human experience, and before this can be achieved, Yossarian must confront the unadorned facticity of Snowden's death. As Gary W. Davis (1978) has noted, the discontinuous discourse of Yossarian's superiors is so potent as to transform traditional understandings of such concepts as 'death', 'presence', and 'absence'. For example, Yossarian is ordered to continue to share his tent with the "dead man" Mudd, a flier who was killed before officially reporting to the squadron; since Mudd "had never officially gotten into the squadron", the Air Force argues, "he could never officially be gotten out." (Heller, 1967: 111) The official discourse blinkers the novel's characters to the realities of all basic terms. Thus, Clevinger denies Yossarian's claim that the Germans are trying to kill him on the grounds that they are trying to kill everybody, and Aarfy rationalizes his murder of Michaela, the officers' maid in Rome, with the argument that she would have said "bad things about us" because he had already raped her. Yossarian has stark experience of a similar manifestation of this discontinuity in the horrific Roman scenes involving various forms of human savagery, but his response there is to suppress or to flee from the terrifying realities. At the sight of the man mercilessly beating the dog, Yossarian "strained helplessly not to see or hear", and when he stumbles on another man brutally assaulting a child, Yossarian "crossed quickly to the other side of the immense avenue to escape the nauseating sight." Later, Yossarian "hurried away in shame" from the helpless old woman who has just been robbed, and he "welcomed the concealing shelter of the drizzling, drifting, lightless, nearly opaque gloom." (Heller, 1967: 426) Through his urge not to see or become involved, Yossarian is associated in these scenes with the apathetic crowd of spectators, practically immune to human suffering and so isolated from reality.

It is the final and fully detailed vision of the shattered Snowden which places the earlier, fragmentary references into proper psychological and thematic perspective. Thematically, of course, Heller is justified in withholding the completed scene until the close of the novel, for **all** experience on Pianosa has become disjointed, incomplete, and any continuity of vision, such as Yossarian appears finally to achieve, must be hard won. In human terms, the gradual amplification of the scene reflects Yossarian's inability, at first, to cope with the trauma he has experienced (he is "in a state of utter shock" (Heller, 1967: 267) when he heaves the plane after the Avignon mission) and to fully come to terms with a situation in which confusion, fear, panic, and terror are fused an instant away from death; it also suggests his deep psychological need to confront the reality of the situation in its starkest terms, not to deny or smother it in the numbing jargon of the of-

ficial discourse. Part of the tension within the episode itself derives from Yossarian's misplaced sense of relief after the ordeal of bandaging Snowden's minor wound. "The actual contact with the dead flesh had not been nearly as repulsive as he had anticipated, and he found excuse to caress the wound with his fingers again and again to convince himself of his own courage." As it turns out, the wound is a mere scratch compared to what Yossarian discovers moments later on investigating the second wound:

Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out.

Yossarian screamed a second time and squeezed both hands over his eyes. His teeth were chattering in horror. 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. (Heller, 1967: 449)

When the naked Yossarian leaves the plane, he has "Snowden smeared abundantly all over his bare heels and toes, knees, arms and fingers." Doc Daneeka "washed Snowden off him with cold wet balls of absorbent cotton" and plunges Yossarian into a prolonged drugged forgetfulness. Characteristically, officialdom seeks to anaesthetize the individual to the elemental human reality. Doc Daneeka is routinely prepared to continue drugging Yossarian until he is "all right" - until he puts on his uniform again, that is, and so renders himself subject once more to the illusory closed system of the Air Corps.

Earlier in the novel, we find Yossarian in hospital with his imaginary liver condition, with the required number of missions set at 45, and with Yossarian himself having completed 38. He has just flown on the Avignon mission, so Snowden is quite recently dead. The hospital is a refuge, a sanctuary from the ugly facts of death. "They couldn't dominate Death inside the hospital," we learn, "but they certainly made her behave. They had taught her manners. They couldn't keep Death out, but while she was in she had to act like a lady. People gave up the ghost with delicacy and taste inside the hospital. There was none of that crude, ugly ostentation about dying that was so common outside the hospital. They did not blow up in mid-air like Kraft or the dead man in Yossarian's tent, or freeze to death in the blazing summer-time the way Snowden had frozen to death after spilling his secret to Yossarian in the back of the plane." (Heller, 1967: 170) With its sanitized version of death, the hospital is paradigmatic of the cocooned Air Corps 'reality', which reflexively divorces the signifier from the signified. In so far as Yossarian deliberately retreats into this haven, therefore, he is clearly subscribing to the Air Corps' discontinuous system; he is prepared to exploit

that system so long as it allows him to be left alone.

The "message" Yossarian finally reads in Snowden's entrails (and it is significant that his reading of the message is only revealed shortly before Yossarian's decision to desert) points him in the opposite direction, to an authenticity beyond discourse, an apparently existential reality of instinctual truth. "Man was matter," Yossarian sees, "that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out of 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." (Heller, 1967: 450) Yossarian's total reconstruction of the scene suggests his success in seeing through the discontinuity imposed on experience by the Air Corps, and asserts the reality of our own mortal being against the mythologizing tendencies of that system. The idea posited by Heller would appear to be that only by some direct experience of the fact of mortality - and not by any intellectual process - is it possible to survive the insidious madness of the Catharts of our contemporary world.

IV

Three years after the publication of *Catch-22*, it was still possible for a leading critic to assert of the digressions in the novel that "they are by and large interchangeable - so much so that many of them could actually be removed without in the least marring the novel's structure ... removing some of the episodes could cut down the repetitiveness, the redundancy, and improve the novel considerably." Waldmeir's (1964) comments reflect the initial critical impatience with the novel for its failure to conform to the traditional chronological pattern. His position would be difficult to justify today, especially in the light of the wide subsequent interest taken in the idea of discontinuity. With the facts of the Vietnam war having far outdone the fictional absurdity of *Catch-22*, it may well be that the novel will find its permanent place in the development of the modern novel not for its celebrated 'black' humour but for its early perspectives on the discontinuities which delimit contemporary experience. If that does turn out to be the case, then Heller's unorthodox handling of time and structure - what Waldmeir and others were ready to write off as "repetitiveness" and "redundancy" - will be seen as instrumental to many of the novel's central insights. One would be left to echo Laurence Sterne's (1967: 95) defence of the digression as a narrative technique two centuries earlier, that to "take them out of this book ... you might as well take the book along with them."

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, pp. 357-58.
2. *The New Yorker*, December 9, 1961, pp. 247-49.
3. *Esquire*, July 1963, p. 22.
4. *The New Republic*, November 13, 1961, pp. 11-13.
5. "Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey", *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Autumn 1964, pp. 192-204.
6. "The Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*," *Critique* IX (1966-67), pp. 46-57.
7. See, for example, Doug Gaukroger, "Time Structure in *Catch-22*", *Critique* XII (1970-71), pp. 70-85.
8. Theodore Baird, "The Time-Scheme of *Tristram Shandy* and a Source", *PMLA* LI (1936), pp. 803-820; A.A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (London, 1952), pp. 158-200; Henri Fluchere, *Laurence Sterne* (London, 1965), pp. 90-130.
9. *Tristram Shandy* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 107.

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