

# *Catch-22* and the Culture of the 1950s

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We most often think of *Catch-22* as a novel of the 1960s presciently arriving in 1961 just in time to provide a vocabulary for understanding the social and political upheavals which would characterize much of the rest of the decade.<sup>1</sup> No American novel of the 1960s seemed to speak more directly to the particular preoccupations of those years, and none found a more attentive or faithful audience. No '60s book entered the wider culture more quickly or fully, either; an understanding of the meaning of its title has so thoroughly permeated the culture that I have yet to see answered correctly in the game Trivial Pursuit the question asking which came first, the term "Catch-22" or the novel (the correct answer is, of course, the novel).

Alternatively, we think of it as a work of the 1940s, to be put alongside *The Naked and the Dead* and *From Here to Eternity* as a fictional exploration of military experience in the titanic conflict of World War Two. Its action, however satirically or even surrealistically treated, does occur in a real theater of that war and has as its emotional center the wounding of a soldier who is comforted by a comrade unaware of the mortal nature of those wounds, what Paul Fussell has called the "primal scene" of war fiction.

We are not wrong, of course, in thinking of *Catch-22* as a novel of the 1940s, as in a sense a historical novel, and we are certainly right to understand it as imaginatively anticipating the sensibility of the 1960s. Its mordantly hilarious send-up of military organization and absurdist

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961).

satire of official cant spoke powerfully and directly to the temper of the turbulent years of the 1960s. Like every writer of a great book, Heller was in advance of his culture, his sensitive antennae alert to what his culture would only later discover, and when it caught up with him it would in significant degree adopt his prefiguration of the meaning of contemporary experience.

In this sense of the artist as unacknowledged legislator the writer is a maker of culture. But culture also shapes the artist: he or she cannot help but be acted upon by the cultural cruxes and ideologies of an era, and these perforce become imbedded in the artist's work. We have overlooked how much *Catch-22* is a novel of the 1950s, imaginatively portraying some of the same cultural transformations which absorbed the attention of several of the leading social scientists and cultural critics of the time. In these preoccupations it is as much or more a novel of the '50s as those decades which preceded or followed it.

First, though, let me offer a disclaimer. This is not an "influence study," a recipe listing the ingredients which mixed together produced *Catch-22*, nor is it one in intertextuality. It is clear that Heller's reading had an effect on his novel, and, somewhat oddly, it is one of the more bookish novels of our time. He has publicly acknowledged the influence of Nelson Algren and Louis Ferdinand Celine, and in the novel itself he alludes to the work of a number of other writers including such diverse figures as Matthew Arnold, Melville, Francois Villon, and Dostoevsky. A rich tradition of war novels and memoirs lies behind it as well. Who can fail to think of Frederic Henry's desertion in *A Farewell to Arms* as Yossarian debates whether to flee to Sweden, or for that matter, of Huckleberry Finn's lighting out for the territory away from a morally putrid civilization? Perhaps not enough recognition has been given to *Catch-22* as a Marxist novel, these Marxists being Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. The Marx Brothers films were more than mere entertainments, especially the politically subversive *Duck Soup*, and many of the absurd but not nonsensical exchanges in the novel resemble those between Groucho and his adversaries. Like all great novels, *Catch-22* is over-determined, a pastiche of reading, seeing, listening, and experience which is organized and transformed by a commanding imagination, and no conspectus of its discrete parts can even approximate the genius of its whole. Nevertheless, there is some value in specifying as best we can a novel's etiology, for if nothing else it helps us to remember that artists

are not demiurges but participants in a specific culture whose works inevitably bear the imprint of their cultural experience and who themselves have an uncommon power in turn to shape culture.

In an interview with Paul Krassner shortly after the book's publication, Heller acknowledged his ambition to write a contemporary book. "I don't mean contemporaneous with World War II," he said; "it is contemporary with the period I was writing in," that is, with the 1950s. Although he did not mean *Catch-22* "to be a sociological treatise," it was nevertheless a book of "comment" which made it "almost an encyclopedia of the current mental atmosphere."<sup>2</sup>

In trying to distinguish what in *Catch-22* derives from the culture of the 1950s, it is useful to begin with a modest example having to do with the word "crazy," so pregnant with meaning for Yossarian. "Crazy" is a word made notoriously problematic in the novel, where it comes to mean its psychological opposite. In *Catch-22*'s eponymous and most famous formulation, to be sane is phlegmatically to embrace irrationality and to be crazy is see clearly. This was not an entirely new notion—Melville, for one, invoked it in *Moby-Dick*—but it began to have renewed currency during the 1950s among two significant culturally-marginal groups, jazz musicians and the Beats. The most widely publicized of all such groups, the Beats borrowed from post-war jazz musicians the word "crazy" to mean something unique, satisfying, and wholly admirable. To Dizzy Gillespie and Jack Kerouac, "crazy" did not mean insane, and to be crazy meant living with a special intensity and clarity. Allen Ginsburg's well-known opening line in "Howl"—"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked"—and indeed the entire poem, make the idea of insanity ambiguous, at once a symptom of derangement, its ancient meaning, and a warrant of emotional purity, a newer meaning which seemed to have special relevance for these important 1950s subcultures.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Heller's employment of the word and concept "crazy" in *Catch-22* is all his own, and marvelously original and funny, but these semantic reformulations by jazz musicians and the Beats in the 1950s suggest how a cultural milieu may provide rich materials to an imaginative writer like Heller, which he can then modify and turn to his own uses.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Krassner, "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller," *The Realist* (November, 1962), reprinted in Frederick T. Kiley and Walter McDonald, *A Catch-22 Casebook* (New York: Crowell, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* (San Francisco: City Light, 1956).

Moreover, for the cultural historian such a field of similar if not identical redefinitions of a critical psychological concept implies fissures in ideology and belief which may indicate that the 1950s were not quite the placid and uneventful years they are often been assumed to have been.

One of the striking features of *Catch-22* when it is put alongside earlier novels set in World War Two is the paucity of enlisted men in it. Ex-PFC Wintergreen controls the mimeograph machine and thus exercises extraordinary power, and Sergeant Towser makes an appearance or two, as do a few other enlisted men, but they are minor characters about whom we learn very little. This is a far cry from the ethnically and socially heterogeneous platoons of enlisted men who inhabit *The Naked and the Dead* or *From Here to Eternity*—not to mention dozens of films about the war—with their yeasty mix of Brooklyn Jewish proletarians, Texas rednecks, Main Line socialites, and the like. Writing their novels, Mailer and Jones remembered the 1930s they grew up in and especially the socially-conscious novels of the Depression with their intense interest in the nature of the working class. Their books continued to be concerned with the question which so absorbed the 1930s, namely did the working class—as it was represented in wartime among the ranks of enlisted men—have spiritual resources which might be tapped to oppose American fascism and to construct a more equitable society? Joseph Heller was likewise interested in discovering how to balk the most reactionary elements in American life. Signaling Yossarian's status as an outsider by making him of Assyrian descent was perhaps a residue of the mentality of the 1930s, but the microcosmic society Heller creates is a staunchly middle-class one. His characters are officers, divided by the rigid barriers of the military caste system from an almost invisible enlisted-man working class. Colonel Cathcart believes that enlisted men have a different God than officers and is quizzically surprised and then angry when the chaplain informs him differently. Other characters in the novel do not necessarily share Colonel Cathcart's classist myopia, but they are—and the book is—largely unconcerned with such questions of class difference.

Distinctions of social class in America did not, of course, disappear following World War Two, but before the publication of Michael Hanington's *The Other America* in 1962 and President Johnson's subsequent formulation of "The War on Poverty," cultural commentators often seemed to believe that the United States was uniformly middle-

class in its beliefs and aspirations. Thus, David Riesman could in 1950 write *The Lonely Crowd*, a study in national character, and without apology hardly mention the predicaments of workers or the poor,<sup>4</sup> and Daniel Bell could announce in 1960 "the end of ideology," one implication of which was his assumption that all Americans, working class and bourgeoisie alike, shared an isomorphic culture which rendered class conflict obsolete.<sup>5</sup> *Catch-22* reflects this mental atmosphere of the post-war years, so different from the Depression mentality which preceded it and the iconoclastic sensibility which followed, although Joseph Heller's perspective on 1950s culture was considerably more astringent than that of some of the decade's cultural commentators.

Among other things *Catch-22* is about bureaucracy, one of the handful of serious novels in our literature which pays any significant attention to this important feature of contemporary life, although it was a phenomenon almost obsessively addressed by social analysts in the 1950s, among them David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, and William H. Whyte. Whyte's *The Organization Man*, for example, published in 1956, undertook to examine the effects of bureaucratization on individual consciousness and to suggest how the organizational ethos was transforming the character of the American middle class.<sup>6</sup> Whatever bureaucracy they worked in, said Whyte, organization men prized loyalty more than imagination or independence and were suspicious of anyone who made himself obtrusive, preferring the "team-player" instead. Their compulsive emphasis on "personality relationships within the group" and distrust of independent thought made for a numbing conformity, just as their uncritical identification with the purposes of their organizations tended to occlude any authentic personal identity.

*Catch-22* is of course a good deal more than a fictional gloss on *The Organization Man*, but the novel's mordant anatomy of the bureaucratic mentality does echo Whyte's in a number of ways. The Army bureaucracy is obtuse and stupid, insisting that a dead man—Mudd—is alive and a live man—Doc Daneeka—is dead, both misapprehensions the result of reified paperwork, the bane of all bureaucracies. But purblind bureaucracies are hardly new, writers as far back as Gogol satirizing them. What *Catch-22* derives from the 1950s is its view of the organiza-

4 David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

5 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

6 William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

tion man as a new breed, committed uncritically to the organization's goals and coercing unswerving allegiance to them from subordinates. These new men compete for power in the organization not so much by demonstrating greater competence in their work as by their ability to manipulate the structure of the organization.

The competition between Generals Dreedle and Peckem perhaps best illustrates this new mentality. General Dreedle may not be an entirely admirable figure but he is clearly preferable to General Peckem, who covets his superior's power and in fact triumphs over him. General Dreedle is an organizational anachronism, a bluff, tactless old-style soldier unconcerned with the men in his command except when they are on duty; after their work is done they are free to behave however they wish. His attitudes are more like those of the boss in a nineteenth-century factory than a modern manager: production is what matters to him, not a uniform adherence to an all-encompassing code of organizational behavior. Thus, when Yossarian appears naked in formation to receive his medal and Colonel Cathcart promises to punish him for it, General Dreedle scoffs at Colonel Cathcart. "He's just won a medal," General Dreedle says; "if he wants to receive it without any clothes on, what the hell business is it of yours?"

General Peckem recognizes that such a laissez-faire attitude and stress on efficiency in production are not what the modern organization values, and that the man who wishes to get ahead will do so on the strength of his superior capacities for self-promotion and his alertness to opportunities to make his role in the organization appear essential, even if those appearances have nothing to do with real goals. Thus, General Peckem recommends that men go into combat in full-dress uniform so if they are shot down the enemy will be properly impressed, and he devises the concept of "bomb patterns" which makes for more striking aerial photographs of bomb-runs but which in fact tends to diminish the effectiveness of the sorties. He is no less attentive to his personal style than to the style of his underlings. His uniforms are custom-made, and his diction is if anything even more tailored, the oblique, enervated language of bureaucracy. General Peckem is appropriately an officer in the Special Services, the military branch concerned with morale: his talents lie entirely in the realm of "human engineering" and public relations.

The Organization Man mentality triumphs when General Peckem replaces General Dreedle, but his victory is a Pyrrhic one because

immediately an even more resolute Organization Man becomes his commanding officer. Former Lieutenant Scheisskopf, who has experienced a meteoric rise to commanding general, becomes General Peckem's superior. General Scheisskopf's sole interest is in parading his troops in close formation, the ultimate expression of mindless conformity and coerced organizational unity. Looked at as a novel about bureaucracy, then, *Catch-22* closes with the absolute triumph of organizational values, leaving the individual with only a single option: to conform or to flee.

Joseph Heller spoke of *Catch-22* as a novel of "comment" on the culture of the 1950s, and nowhere does this term seem to be more accurate than in its asides on politics. None of the actual political issues of the mid-1940s makes an appearance in the novel, but those of the 1950s frequently do. Thus, congressmen demand to know "who promoted Major Major"; C.I.D. and FBI men spy on fellow citizens; Captain Black instigates the Great Loyalty Oath crusade; and Chaplain Tappan is extralegally interrogated in a cellar by three shadowy officers and summarily judged guilty of crimes neither he nor his accusers can name. McCarthyism is the inspiration for all these incidents, and while some of them try to discredit that political phenomenon by humorous exaggeration—as in Captain Black's insistence that the more loyalty oaths one signs, the more loyal one is—and some hint at the Orwellian nature of McCarthyism, none of the novel's political commentary is as successfully assimilated to the main themes of the novel as are the explorations of the bureaucratic mentality. There may be many reasons for this lack of development, of course, but an important one may very well be that the 1950s were a decade famously deficient in coherent political alternatives to the dominant Cold War ideology. According to the historian Richard Pells, 1950s intellectual life was characterized by a pragmatic, accommodationalist temper and an absence of ideological conflict. "Where in the 1930s," he writes, "[intellectuals] might have valued ideological strife and social upheaval, they now desired a politics of stability and moderation. The 1950s were for them a decade not only of lowered aspirations but also of lowered voices."<sup>7</sup> *Catch-22* was hardly an accommodationalist novel, but written as it was in a period of ideological quietism it is not surprising that it was unable to mount a more vig-

7 Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 140.

orous and unified critique of American political behavior.

More successful was the novel's imaginative figuration of the extraordinary developments in American corporate culture following World War Two. C. Wright Mills' 1956 study, *The Power Elite*, examined a growing concentration of power among a small, overlapping elite of business, governmental, and military leaders, a group which Mills felt was insidiously subverting democratic institutions and equating the national interest with their own.<sup>8</sup> A few years after Mills' study appeared, President Eisenhower in his farewell address would give popular currency to this idea when he warned the nation of the distended power of the "military-industrial complex." What Mills and President Eisenhower cautioned against was brilliantly concentrated and symbolized in *Catch-22* by Milo Minderbinder and his M & M Enterprises. "What's good for the syndicate is good for the country," says Milo, echoing the famous statement made by General Motors president Charles Wilson during his confirmation hearings as Secretary of Defense in 1953. Everyone has a share in the syndicate, Milo insists, and thus like General Motors, the welfare of M & M Enterprises is synonymous with the health of the entire society.

M & M Enterprises is constructed along the model of the expansionist corporate enterprises which enjoyed such success after World War Two, moving into foreign markets and mingling commercial and political power to control local economies. This sort of economic imperialism was not unknown before 1945—United Fruit's sovereignty in Central America provided an exemplar—but its heyday came only after the consolidation of American military and economic power in World War Two. Milo's syndicate is a vertically-organized monopoly trading in every kind of commodity, but with a strong emphasis on consumer goods which raised the standard of living among the nominal shareholders in his enterprise and thus encouraged them to acquiesce in its activities. To guarantee the stability of his trading markets, Milo becomes Vice-Shah of Oran, Caliph of Baghdad, and Inman of Damascus, among a plethora of other political titles. Milo himself is a perfect nincompoop—he doesn't even know what an artichoke is—except in matters of capitalist enterprise, where he is a genius. For Milo, business is entirely a matter of profit and loss without an ethical dimen-

8 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).



sion. He is thus unlike his predecessors as captains of industry, men like John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie, who whatever their actual behaviors stoutly professed capitalism's moral responsibilities. Milo's amorality leads him to contract with the Nazis to bomb his own men, creating a public outrage until he is exonerated when he reveals how profitable the operation was.

Would Milo Minderbinder have been imagined as a one-man military-industrial complex and M & M Enterprises as an imperialistic multi-national corporation before the 1950s? It hardly seems likely. Joseph Heller's genius was in his ability to perceive the cultural developments of those years and to transform them into images and narratives which crystallized and clarified their moral and political implications.

The climax of *Catch-22* occurs when Colonels Cathcart and Korn tempt Yossarian with a proposition which will not only spare him having to fly more missions but will also send him home to a hero's welcome. All Yossarian has to do in return is to agree to "like" the two colonels and to say nice things about them. The terms Colonels Cathcart and Korn propose to Yossarian are indeed curious, much less Mephistophelean than such temptations usually are. But this proposition, like much else in the novel, derives from the specific cultural context of the 1950s and provides a commentary on the values of those years.

David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, which he subtitled "a study of the changing American character," was perhaps the decade's most influential book. In it, Riesman delineated a new character type which he saw emerging after World War Two, one which he called "other-directed." This new type flourished especially in the large bureaucratic organizations which were increasingly dominating American life. According to Riesman, individuals who were other-directed had a strong need to be liked, even by people who were their social inferiors, and were given to falsely personalizing even impersonal aspects of social relations. "While all people want and need to be liked by some of the people some of the time," Riesman wrote, "it is only the modern other-directed types who make this their chief source of direction and chief area of sensitivity" (22).

Colonel Cathcart's and Colonel Korn's invitation to friendship, then, apparently so innocuous, is emblematic, a snare to co-opt Yossarian into a fellowship which also includes General Peckem and Milo

Minderbinder, in fact all of the representatives of the new post-war cultural order. When Yossarian agrees to "like" the two colonels, even joining in the bogus fellowship of a round of first names, he thus accepts by implication the spurious and destructive values of the 1950s culture which the novel has exposed.

This "monolithic society"—the phrase is Joseph Heller's—of triumphant other-directed Organization Men leaves Yossarian just two alternatives: a comfortable if ignoble acceptance or headlong flight, and ultimately, of course, he chooses the latter. Finally, then, more than anything else this narrowed formulation of Yossarian's alternatives at the end of the novel reminds us of how much *Catch-22* is a novel of the 1950s. A more ideological decade, say the 1930s or the 1960s, would have provided a richer field of potential responses to a moral man sickened by a repressive cultural order.