

MARCH 4, 1968GEORGE H. FORD

One of the unwritten rules of the Literary Club is that topics ought to be outside the reader's areas of specialization. The doctor is not supposed to talk of his medical experiences; the businessman not to talk of marketing, the professor of English not to talk of literature. The rule has been constantly violated, of course, but the principle was a good one and worthy of aspiring to. Because tonight I am going to offer a kind of book review of an American novel, CATCH 22, by Joseph Heller, and a discussion of some novels that can be grouped with it, it would look as if the rule were once more being violated. I do not think this is so, for I am in no sense an expert on this topic; it is one that I'd never air in a classroom for I do not "keep up" (as we say) with contemporary American literature.

And I can substantiate my amateur status by admitting that I had never really read Heller's novel, CATCH 22, until a year ago, and yet it had been on the market for six years at that point and had been an extraordinarily successful best-seller with almost 2,000,000 copies sold since its publication in 1961. To some of my friends and to many of my students, this book has been a kind of bible -- and coming to it as late as I do, I feel a kind of outsider. At this date one cannot really offer a review; instead one offers a kind of re-review. And yet there are some good reasons for reviewing, or re-reviewing this novel at the present time. For one thing, CATCH 22 is being made into a movie--a movie to be directed by Mike Nichols in which Alan Arkin will play the leading role of Yossarian. And another reason is that Mr. Heller's second novel is about to be published, an event which prompts a glance back to his earlier work.

But the principal justification for re-inspecting CATCH 22 is that it is such a representative production, representative of the zany kind of comic writing that has been flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic during the past ten years. For this kind of writing there have been, of course, some significant forbearers: Thurber and Benchley in America, and in England the comedy of Ronald Firbank, the early Huxley, and above all, Evelyn Waugh. The more recent crop,

beginning with Kingsley Amis in England and starring J.P. Donleavy and his Ginger Man, is well-represented by the author of CATCH 22. It is appropriate that in a recently published paperback collection called "Black Humor" which features selections from Nabokov, John Barth, Edward Albee, and Conleavy, there is a chapter from Heller's novel. We hear much of Black Power these days (especially in Rochester); and during the same period there has been a comparable proliferation in literature, which has no connection with mistrel shows or race questions, the proliferation of Black Humor, the sense that the only fitting response to the horrifying is laughter.

In speaking of this Black Humor I have been stressing the modernity and topicality of CATCH 22, but one could just as appropriately stress its traditionalism. This novel belongs to a long line of books in our literature which satisfy some need we have to make fun of authorities and father-figures, to thumb our noses at the Establishment (the accepted order of things), and our need to be suspicious of anything smacking of heroics and heroism. Before summarizing the events of this novel, let me strike a keynote for it by quoting a great passage from one of George Orwell's essays. Orwell observed that in all of us are two opposing selves, one represented by Don Quixote, the embodiment of heroic idealism, and the other by Sancho Panza, the embodiment of commercial common sense and skin-saving. "The two principles" Orwell observed "noble folly and base wisdom exist side by side in nearly every human being. If you look into your own mind, which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza?" And Orwell answers:

Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. He is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul. His tastes lie towards safety, soft beds, no work, pots of beer and women with 'voluptuous' figures. He it is who punctures your fine attitudes and urges you to look after Number One,

to be unfaithful to your wife, to bilk your debts,... and so forth. Whether you allow yourself to be influenced by him is a different question. But it is simply a lie to say that he is not part of you, just as it is a lie to say that Don Quixote is not part of you either.

And Orwell continues this contrast by pointing out that the humorous view of life is one that we often pretend isn't there, for society has to assume we are heroic:

Society...must assume that men think it glorious to die on the battlefield and women want to wear themselves out with child-bearing. The whole of what one may call official literature is founded on such assumptions. I never read the proclamations of generals before battle, the speeches of fuhrers and prime ministers, the solidarity songs of schools...and political parties, national anthems, and sermons...against gambling and contraception, without seeming to hear in the background a chorus of raspberries from all the millions of common men to whom these high sentiments make no appeal! Nevertheless the high sentiments always win in the end. When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic. Women face childbirth and the scrubbing brush, revolutionaries keep their mouths shut in the torture chamber, battleships go down with their guns still firing when their decks are awash. It is only that the other element in man, the lazy, cowardly, debt-bilking adulterer who is inside all of us, can never be suppressed altogether and needs a hearing occasionally.

Mr. Heller's novel certainly provides an occasion for hearing this other voice, this chorus of raspberries. And the extraordinary popularity of the book suggests that readers of the 1960's are especially attuned to enjoying the chorus. It is perhaps a symptom

of our times that an avant-garde magazine, (one of the mimeographed ones), recently started at the University of Buffalo is called PAUNCH. The editorial in the second issue explains that the publication is dedicated to spreading the doctrines of my Rochester colleague, N.O. Brown, and that it takes its name and its principles from Sancho Panza.

CATCH 22 is a novel about a war, the Second World War. Or to identify it more precisely, inasmuch as we get confused these days about which war was which, we could call it the 1939-1945 War.

The setting for the novel is an American Air Force bomber base in the Mediterranean. The hero, or perhaps we should just call him the leading character, is an Assyrian-American, Captain Yossarian, an air force bombardier who has participated in a long succession of bombing raids over German-occupied Italy.

Captain Yossarian is understandably anxious to avoid further missions; he wants to be sent home to America. His colonel has promised that when anyone in the squadron has completed thirty bombing raids he will be sent home, but this tantalizing carrot is never eaten by the squadron's donkeys because the colonel keeps raising the limit from thirty raids to forty, from forty to sixty, from sixty to eighty and so on.

Captain Yossarian attempts to break out of this trap by a variety of dodges. Sometimes he contrives to avoid a raid by getting admitted into the hospital with an assumed liver complaint that baffles the doctors. Sometimes he poses as insane-- as for example when he turns up on parade to receive a medal for heroism and he is discovered to have no clothes on. On another occasion he simply disconnects his intercom system during a raid and his plane turns back. He has many ploys, and after he has tried them all he resorts to refusing to go on any more missions, but there is a catch, as there is always a catch, and the bombing raids continue. Not until the last pages of the book does Yossarian finally break out of the trap when he decides to desert and escape to Sweden, a neutral country where the girls are what Orwell called voluptuous and reputed to be very friendly. His best friend had got to Sweden by paddling a life raft through

the Straits of Gibraltar, and Yossarian thinks he can get there too.

Here is the principal plot-line of the book, and throughout we are primarily involved with Yossarian's adventures in hospitals, or Roman brothels when he is on leave, or on bombing missions over Bologna, or on missions to obtain black market supplies for the officers' dining hall. And Yossarian is also, it seems, the author's spokesman. He is a sensitive, reflective young man who has thought about war, about pain in war or peacetime, and about God. We learn very little about his life before the war--an omission which seemed odd to me--but it is obvious, in his reflections, that he is well read, like his creator. Mr. Heller, we are reminded, holds degrees from NYU, Columbia, and Oxford, and was an Instructor of English for two years at Penn State before moving on to more remunerative pastures on the staff of TIME magazine. His hero is similarly equipped, and he has a view of the military organization that often goes with such a background. Yossarian hates, as he says, "bigots, snobs, hypocrites", but he has some loyal affection for those of his fellow-officers in the air force who are combat officers--the pilots, bombardiers, and navigators--most of whom get killed during the course of the book.

For the generals and colonels, of course, no affection is wasted. They are presented as absurdities--the old Colonel Blimp style--men who are motivated either by a desperate desire for promotion or by spite against some other general or colonel. There are some mildly funny scenes of their antics. Colonel Cathcart, the commanding officer, is pathetically anxious to have an article about himself appear in the Saturday Evening Post--and he resorts to all sorts of schemes to achieve notoriety, even if his squadron suffers for them. The senior officers, no matter how many times we see them, are what E.M. Forster calls flat characters, or here, more precisely, caricatures.

Not all the unpleasant characters in CATCH 22 are senior officers. There is an exceedingly unpleasant corporal, and then there is Lieutenant Milo, the catering officer, who is not so much unpleasant as simply madly corrupt. Milo's elaborate syndicate which brings in exotic food supplies from all countries in

Europe is described many times in the novel. These sections have been anthologized, and evidently many readers regard them as the funniest parts of the book.

I found myself that we get far too much of Milo's antics. These are sections that a good editor ought to have cut drastically. In fact, despite my admiration for Mr. Heller's obvious skills, I did wish that his whole book were shorter, for his effects are not cumulative; they are merely repetitive. I was especially bothered by the early sections of the novel which suffer from Heller's clumsy and unselective mode of introducing a whole regiment of characters at once so that the reader is swamped by an array of titles and names that he cannot differentiate or remember.

Most of these combat officers, Yossarian's "pals" as he calls them, get killed during the course of the book. The death scenes are presented straight, so to speak, for if CATCH 22 is predominantly a funny novel it is also, at times, a sad and solemn one too. Mr. Heller is not afraid of disconcerting his readers by rapid shifts of gear--from slap-stick comedy and satire through realistic reporting and up to the tragic.

These death scenes are, as I said, impressively rendered, and in general, when it comes to invoking the air force experiences, Mr. Heller is a fine documentary writer. What is it like to be a bombardier in the nose of a big plane which is bouncing its way through curtains of flak? What is it like when the turret-gunner is fatally wounded and you try to bandage him together again? Here Mr. Heller seems to me to be always (if the phrase isn't too pat) on target.

But serious reporting of military experience is not the principal ingredient of CATCH 22. Nor is the satire. The dominant mode of this novel is comic--in the best sense--a comedy based on Mr. Heller's new-old discovery that war is madness, or that all experience is madness--trite phrases that take on a new lease of life in his handling of the theme.

Lionel Trilling noted that just as all

philosophy can be regarded as a footnote to Plato so all novels can be regarded as a footnote to Don Quixote, a novel that keeps prodding us into asking: what is reality? what is appearance?--CATCH 22 rephrases these questions with a new twist. It prods us to ask: what is sanity? what is insanity? Especially in wartime. Yossarian is chiefly inspired by a desire to stay alive, a desire which we should ordinarily regard as healthy and sane, but in the context of an Air Force base, he seems unhealthy or insane. From his point of view it is the organization waging the war that must be insane rather than the man who bucks against the organization--but we cannot be sure. When it is reported to the doctors that Yossarian dreams every night he is holding a live fish in his hands, he is sent to a psychiatrist, whose diagnosis, in psychiatric jargon, is that Yossarian is suffering from "survival-anxieties". But in this very funny scene, it becomes obvious that it is the psychiatrist who is quite mad; it is the patient who is sane even though he seemingly cannot control the absurd world in which he is placed. "Are you crazy?" -- this schoolboy question takes on a new dimension in CATCH 22; every character in the book asks it of every other character. On my second reading of the novel I tried underlining the word crazy so as to establish a count; I gave up after a couple of chapters, for the word recurs on every page.

ly Let me cite a page from the book to illustrate. It is a passage which explains the title. Early in the book Yossarian decides that the only way he can get out of combat missions is to be declared insane, and he goes to the Air Force doctor to ask about it:

"You're wasting your time", Doc Daneeka was forced to tell him.
 "Can't you ground someone who's crazy?"
 "Oh, sure. I have to. There's a rule saying I have to ground anyone who's crazy",
 "Then why don't you ground me? (Yossarian says.) I'm crazy. Ask any of the others. They'll tell you how crazy I am".
 "They're crazy." (Says the doctor)
 "Then why don't you ground them?"

"Because they're crazy, that's why."
(Says Yossarian)

"Of course they're crazy," Doc Daneeka replied. "I just told you they're crazy, didn't I? And you can't let crazy people decide whether you're crazy or not, can you?"

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?" (his friend)

"He sure is", Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said.

"He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"
(Says Yossarian)

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied, "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy." There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch 22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.

This little scene seems to me to be worthy of Kafka-- whose genius it was to show up the absurdity of the human condition. Kafka's heroes keep asking what seem to be reasonable and sane questions to lawyers, priests, officials, and other members of the Establishment. The answers the hero gets from them seem logical and well ordered, but ultimately the various answers make no sense. The well-intentioned hero is baffled and bewildered, and so are we. The scene is also worthy of Lewis Carroll's classic, Alice in Wonderland, - a world of fantastic anarchy yet with its own brand of the logically illogical. Consider, for example, Alice's talk with the Cheshire cat. "I don't want to go among mad people" Alice says. And the cat replies: "Oh, you can't help that . . . we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad." "How do you know I'm mad?" Alice asks. And the cat replies, in the Doc Daneeka vein, "You must be . . . or you wouldn't have come here."

In an essay on Black Humor, Bruce Jay Friedman cites the Jack Ruby case as an example of the crazy world in which we find ourselves, and he notes that many authors have tried to devise a style of fiction that will reflect our sense of its craziness--what he calls "a new, one-foot-in-the-asylum style of fiction."

Heller's "one-foot-in-the-asylum" vein is most obvious in the picaresque-style funny scenes, but it is also evident in his more ambitious treatment of his main theme: the search for the nature of sanity. Among the combat officers there are a few happy extroverts who accept the situation without complaint--the weird military hierarchy, the killing, and the ever-present threat of death or of mutilation worse than death. One of these is described by Yossarian as a man who "did not have brains enough to be afraid." But Yossarian is more troubled by men who do have brains and yet accept the situation. His pilot, McWatt, he describes as "the craziest combat man of them all probably, because he was perfectly sane and still did not mind the war." Others, like Yossarian, exhibit symptoms of that "survival-anxiety", and they crack up in various ways. One of them after fifty missions suffers from nightmares, and he yells all through the night. Another cracks up during a raid, grabs the

controls from the pilot, and tries to crash the plane, screaming over the intercom that the bombardier has been hurt.

Real madness, that is, may be a symptom of real sanity.

A recently published book on the literature of war, entitled "Heroes' Twilight" by Bernard Bergonzi, relates CATCH 22 to the two traditional ways in which war has been regarded in the western world. In Shakespeare's history plays, one is represented by Hotspur, the heroic fire-and-brimstone fighter--and the other by Fat Falstaff for whom honor is nonsense and who, as a soldier, "embodies the biological virtue of cowardice." Yossarian had had a distinguished record as a fighting man, but he has come to believe in survival as the only "absolute value." As he says to one of the Hotspur-type airmen, with whom he is having an argument: "It doesn't make a damned bit of difference who wins the war to someone who is dead." In biological terms, that is, Colonel Cathcart is Yossarian's enemy. And the novelist rams his point home in a speech by an old Italian who has survived many wars and who presents the crazy yet persuasive argument that Americans are foolish when they put stock in winning wars.

The real trick (he argues) lies in losing wars, in knowing which wars can be lost. Italy has been losing wars for centuries, and just see how splendidly we've done nonetheless. France wins wars and is in a continual state of crisis. Germany loses and prospers.

The response of our comic writers to this upside-down world is to portray it as an upside-down world in such a way that laughter may make it bearable. According to Henri Bergson, we are prompted to laugh whenever we can detect the mechanical in some activity that should be vital or spontaneous. And his theory may apply to Heller's making the military establishment funny to us, for we view it as a vast mechanism, the army-machine.

As an example, we may review what happens to

the Air Force base doctor, Doc Daneeka. The doctor is terrified of flying in airplanes but is required, by regulations, to put in a certain number of hours of flying-time each month. He persuades pilots to list him as having gone along on flights without his having left the ground. One day, however, the plane in which he was supposedly a passenger, crashes, and he is, therefore, officially listed as dead. The War Department notifies his wife, and all sorts of machinery begins to turn. His \$10,000 GI insurance policy starts payments to her, and with other policies she finds herself rich. When her husband writes to her a passionate almost illegible letter explaining that he is not dead and asking her to take up his case with the War Department, she fears she must be hearing from an imposter, and when she gets a letter from Colonel Cathcart, she moves to East Lansing, Michigan, leaving no address. The letter is a mimeographed announcement as follows:

Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs.
Daneeka. Words cannot express the deep
personal grief I experienced when your
husband, son, father or brother was
killed, wounded or reported missing in
action.

The comedy here is fantastically grotesque, of course, yet there are enough connections with our daily experiences in an IBM world to give the incident a sharpened edge--such experiences as writing a letter to a company or a bank and getting an IBM reply. As for Doc Daneeka's fate, I was reminded of the Communist expression, the development of a "No person". Some weeks ago at the UR campus there was a student in the department office who was in a similar box; he had paid his fees, but the IBM machine somehow had not digested his program, and hence he was not registered in any of the courses for which he had signed up. He could not get into classes, and he had become, in machine terms, a "No student".

In this kind of scene the author, you will note, is not formally protesting; he is simply presenting. And his tone here (although elsewhere he does not sustain it) is an imperturbable one. This, I take it, is the distinctive note of recent comic fiction, a note derived from Evelyn Waugh, I wish there were time to

cite some examples from Waugh and from those of his successors to whom I referred earlier: Kingsley Amis, J.P. Donleavy, John Barth perhaps. I can squeeze in a couple of examples which are, I think, characteristically illustrative.

I should preface these two examples by pointing out that black humor can move through a spectrum from the grim and threatening to the light and less threatening pranksterkind of humor. The first example, from Kingsley Amis, is of the more grim variety. The passage is from Amis's most recent novel, *THE ANTI-DEATH LEAGUE*, which is set in a military camp, like *CATCH 22*. The chaplain at this camp is concerned about a number of crazy officers, and one day he receives a poem through the mail, sent anonymously but written, as we learn later, by one of these crazy *Catch 22*-like officers. It is a Hardy-like poem in which God addresses a baby who has been born into the world without any arms and without any legs. This kind of misfortunate birth was quite common a few years ago, and God, in the poem, enjoys the situation with as much relish as Browning's Caliban enjoys twisting legs off land-crabs that come his way.

TO A BABY BORN WITHOUT LIMBS

This is just to show you who's boss around here.
 It'll keep you on your toes, so to speak,
 Make you put your best foot forward, so to speak,
 And give you something to turn your hand to, so to speak.
 You can face up to it like a man,
 Or snivel and blubber like a baby.
 That's up to you. Nothing to do with Me.
 If you take it in the right spirit,
 You can have a bloody marvellous life,
 With the great rewards courage brings,
 And the beauty of accepting your LOT.
 And think how much good it'll do your Mum and Dad,
 And your Grans and Gramps and the rest of the shower,
 To be stopped being complacent.

Make sure they baptise you, though,
 In case some murdering bastard
 Decides to put you away quick,
 Which would send you straight to LIMBO,
 ha ha ha.
 But just a word in your ear, if you've
 got one.
 Mind you DO take this in the right spirit,
 And keep a civil tongue in your head
 about Me.
 Because if you DON'T
 I've got plenty of other stuff up My
 sleeve,
 Such as Leukemia and polio,
 (Which incidentally you're welcome to any
 time,
 Whatever spirit you take this in.)
 I've given you one love-pat, right?
 You don't want another.
 So watch it, Jack.

This example will probably remind us of the opening
 scene of CATCH 22 in which we are introduced to the
 "soldier in white." Into the hospital ward, you will
 remember, they bring in a heap of white plaster fitted
 with tubes, with zippered lips through which his
 temperature is taken until he dies.

The second example is much less grim. It
 is from Donleavy's novel, A Singular Man, a scene in
 which the hero has offered to drive a blonde home in
 her car. He does not have a driver's license and he
 insists on driving along on the wrong side of the road
 thereby smashing up an oncoming car. The owner of the
 other car is understandably enraged and rushes over
 demanding damages. Donleavy's hero keeps his car door
 locked and holds up a card on which is written:

"Deaf mute. Watch my signs."

and then he begins waving his fingers around excitedly.
 The owner of the other car then goes round to address
 the blonde and the hero brings out another sign which
 reads:

"Lady is mute but can hear."

A fantastic scene follows of finger wagging, and shouts
 from the victim, who tries to establish claims for
 damages, but the couple escape.

After such scenes we may, in effect, ask the novelist if the world is as mad as this--for this is certainly chaos--And from Heller, or Donleavy, or Waugh, we get the same imperturbable reply: But of course it is like this, and what seems to you to be chaos is, in fact, a kind of order that must be confronted.

But by way of conclusion, let me return to CATCH 22. There is an amusing story about Alfred Tennyson that can provide a thread. Tennyson, as you know, was a very ponderous thinker, slow to make up his mind but emphatic when he did so. He was once asked his opinion about Browning's poetry--Now Tennyson admired Browning very much as a man, but he was always bothered by the harsh unmusical nature of his verse. So when someone quizzed him whether Browning's poetry was poetry, Tennyson replied characteristically: "I'll think about it."

A week later he reported to his questioner: "I have thought about it and it is."

My feelings about CATCH 22 are similar. Several months ago a friend said: "But is CATCH 22 a funny book?" Well, I've thought about it and it is.

It is, of course, a special brand. Charles Chaplin, the great comic genius of an earlier generation, does not like the kind of humor that is at the center of CATCH 22. "Modern humour frightens me a little", Chaplain said. "They go in for being crazy. . . Knocking everything down. Annihilating everything." Their humour is "a part of chaos."

All of us can understand Mr. Chaplin's complaint but without all of us subscribing to it fully. The kind of humor we encounter in CATCH 22 and in Amis, Donleavy, Burgess and others is indeed a "part of chaos", but perhaps the special task of the novelist in the 1960's may be to represent chaos and thereby make it bearable. Such humor, I suggest, that is, may be therapeutic. It may not stop the bomb or the bombs from falling (alas, what will?) but in the interim it may keep us sane, or more sane by leading us to ask--as readers of Cervantes have been led to ask these 350 years--what is sanity? Are you crazy? For the Catch 22 of CATCH 22 takes in more than air forces

and armies; it takes in the human experience.

George H. Ford
