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Judith Ruderman

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To Marjory and Lee,

and to Doug

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The insights of many prior studies, and the research of many Heller critics, have stimulated and aided my own efforts. Acknowledgment is made to these sources in the appropriate places in my text. Suffice it to say here that without the work of others, my own readings of Heller would be all the poorer.

Preface: On Heller and Halvah

Reading a book by Joseph Heller can be compared to eating that sticky, sweet confection called halvah, favored by Jews of Eastern European extraction: a little bit is very rich, surfeits the appetite quickly, and can lead to indigestion. It is also, however, tasty and nourishing.

My first encounter with Heller was overwhelming. Attempting to "get into" *Good as Gold*, I threw the book down in disgust. I may be misremembering: I may only have *wished* to throw it down. Certainly I closed the covers more than once, forcing myself afterward to open them again and try once more (I'm one of those readers who always finish what they start, even if they have to skim). But eventually the book worked its charm. I agreed to take it on its own terms—to walk into the house that Heller built, as it were, to sit on its chairs and sup from its table—and once I did that it opened up for me and pulled me into its strange but special world: zany and outrageous, infuriating and frustrating, annoying and exciting. Helleresque, in other words.

Since that time, a decade ago, I have read and reread all of Heller's published works, taught the major ones in noncredit classes for out-of-school adults, and used *Good as Gold* with freshmen and graduate students. Especially with the older students their first—and for some, last—reactions are similar to my initial experience with *Good as Gold*. For many, Heller is hard to take: he appears blasphemous and obscene at his worst; silly, straining, and sophomoric at best. Quite often Heller is dismissed, by readers and critics alike, as not quite first-rate.

On the other hand, Heller's approach appeals to significant numbers, for whom he is a highly valued author, at the forefront of modern American literature. Some literary critics, in particular, have taken Heller so seriously that the author's special brand of humor disappears from view, suffocated under the weight of allusion, definition, and analysis. Sometimes critical vocabulary obscures and distorts the text under discussion, leading the reader away from it

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rather than toward. I am reminded of E. B. White's introduction to the 1941 *Subtreasury of American Humor*, in which he warned that "humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."

The task before the Heller critic is formidable. How to take and treat seriously an author who is very funny? How to credit and highlight the comedy in an author who is simultaneously very solemn? Compounding the problem is the fact that Heller is also very difficult. His first novel, *Catch-22*, presents the reader with an enormous cast of characters, most of them one-dimensional, a confusing chronology of events, and a tone that changes drastically two-thirds of the way into the book. His second, *Something Happened*, locks the reader into the mind of a disturbed and largely despicable character for a painfully interminable five hundred plus pages. His third, *Good as Gold*, uses a real-life political figure as a whipping boy (or maybe not), introduces a major character at the end, adds a dimension late in the day to a one-dimensional character, and in general reads the way a roller-coaster ride feels. His fourth, *God Knows*, has King David singing "Sonny Boy" and comparing cunnilingus to tending sheep. And his fifth, *Picture This*, seems more like a history text in which the pages have been scrambled than it does like a novel as that term is customarily defined. What is one to make of all this?

My aim in this critical study of Joseph Heller is to follow the sensible advice of Jacques Barzun, who said not long ago,

> The critic is properly a servant, of the public and of the artist, both. He removes barriers to understanding and enjoyment, a task that can be performed in many different modes. Or rather, I should say that there are several kinds of criticism but only one mode—the indicative mode. The critic always points, with his finger on the diagnostic spot.[1]

I hope to make both the form and the meaning of Heller's works more comprehensible to the general reader, and to provide a solid introduction to an important American author. To say that this study is not about daring critical hypotheses or clearing new ground is not to imply that it relies wholly on previous critics or has no setting-apart vision. To the contrary, it adds to the recent fine overall studies of Heller—Robert Merrill's in 1987, David Seed's in 1989—a concentration on Heller's notion of art as artifice, and his place in the roster of Jewish-American writers (hence the halvah simile with

which I began). While taking previous attention to Heller into account, I hope to extend the reader's vision of this author in fruitful ways, and to allow him or her to see Heller's body of work as a whole, and in relation to his life.

As removed aesthetically as Heller's work often is from the ways that so-called real life operates, Joseph Heller himself posits a close connection between what T. S. Eliot called the man who suffers and the artist who creates. He would disagree with Eliot, who said that the two are separate, or with Joyce, who in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* envisioned the artist as a god, refined out of existence, paring his fingernails, above his creation. In a panel discussion entitled "Fiction: The Personal Dimension," Heller once remarked that he found it

> almost impossible to read anything by Salinger, Joyce, Proust, Dostoevski, or even Dickens and Conrad, without feeling that the authors themselves were in the same room with me. I can almost hear them breathing and chewing beside me; and pretty much the same thing happens when I enjoy the writing of a new author about whom I know nothing. If I enjoy what I'm reading I grow aware of the author as a personality. I wonder about him and want to know more; and already he has become a character in his own work—unseen, unidentified and unnamed, but an important presence nonetheless.[2]

Reading Heller, one grows very aware of him as a personality and wants to know more about him. With that thought in mind, though recognizing that the art is more (much more) than a reflection of the life, I begin with a biographical account. The succeeding chapters deal with each novel individually, the plays taken as a whole, and Heller's status as a Jewish writer. The concluding chapter summarizes without, I hope, oversimplifying, and points readers back to Joseph Heller, where they belong. As Barzun reminds me, it is the critic's duty not only to explain, but to leave readers their adventure and enjoyment. The critic is but a handmaid to the art.

Chronology

1923	Joseph Heller is born on May 1 in Coney Island, New York, to Isaac and Lena Heller, immigrants from Russia
1927	Isaac Heller dies
1941	Heller graduates from Abraham Lincoln High School in Flatbush section of Brooklyn
1942	works as blacksmith's helper at Norfolk Navy Yard; enlists in Army Air Corps
1944	completes training as gunner
1944–45	engages in combat in Europe
1945	marries Shirley Held; publishes first short story in servicemen's issue of *Story* magazine; begins plans for a war novel; attends University of Southern California
1946	transfers to New York University
1948	receives baccalaureate degree from New York University, Phi Beta Kappa; publishes two short stories in *Esquire* and two in the *Atlantic Monthly*
1949	receives master's degree in English from Columbia University; studies English literature at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University, on a Fulbright Scholarship
1950–52	teaches freshman composition at Pennsylvania State College; collaborates on movie script (never produced) with faculty colleague
1952	daughter Erica is born
1952–62	works in the advertising business as copywriter and, later, promotion manager for a variety of firms, including *Time* (1952–56), *Look* (1956–58), and *McCall's* (1958–61)

1955	writes, rewrites, and publishes first chapter of novel then called *Catch-18*
1956	son Theodore is born
1957	is offered a contract for the novel by Simon and Schuster
1961	publishes *Catch-22;* conceives of second novel
1962	sells movie rights to Columbia Pictures; leaves job at *McCall's;* makes notes for second novel; writes pilot script for TV series
1963	is awarded grant in literature from National Institute of Arts and Letters
mid- to late-1960s	conceives of dramatic version of *Catch-22;* teaches creative writing classes in fiction and drama at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University; writes TV and film scripts; tours country in opposition to US involvement in Vietnam; begins work on *We Bombed in New Haven*
1966	runs as Eugene McCarthy delegate in presidential primary; publishes first section of second novel in *Esquire* magazine
1967	is playwright-in-residence at Yale; *We Bombed in New Haven* is produced by Yale Repertory Company
1968	*We Bombed in New Haven* runs for eleven weeks on Broadway
1970	film version of *Catch-22* is released
1971	produces final script of *Catch-22: A Dramatization;* play is produced in East Hampton; is Distinguished Visiting Writer at the City College of the City of New York for three years
1973	publishes one-act play, *Clevinger's Trial*
1974	completes *Something Happened* and publishes it with Alfred Knopf
1979	publishes *Good as Gold* with Simon and Schuster

1981	begins work on novel about King David; contracts Guillain-Barré syndrome; spends five months in hospital, eight months in physical therapy
1984	divorces Shirley Held; publishes *God Knows* with Knopf
1986	publishes *No Laughing Matter,* coauthored with Speed Vogel, with G. P. Putnam's Sons
1987	marries Valerie Humphries
1988	publishes *Picture This* with Putnam's
1990	publishes portions of sequel to *Catch-22* in *The Nation* and *Smart* magazines
1991	lectures at Oxford University on a Christensen Fellowship

1

Angst for the Memories: The Life and Times of Joseph Heller

> What follows is essentially a true account that is accurate in every detail but those in which it is not.
>
> Epigraph to *No Laughing Matter,* by Joseph Heller and Speed Vogel

Joseph Heller is a trickster. The pose he adopts in public is at times cynical, at times mischievous, on occasion frank. His novels disorient their readers, presenting surprises in technique, plot, and character. He enjoys playing practical jokes in real life as well, and his sense of humor is often so dry that one cannot be sure if he is serious or not, or even happy or sad. A rapid interplay and confusion between tragedy and comedy characterizes both the life and the art, so that in a sense Heller has been the central character in a Jewish joke, and his story exemplifies that Jewish humor he defines, in *Good as Gold,* as the ironic, fatalistic mockery of the Talmud and the shtetl.

Born in the New York City borough of Brooklyn on May 1, 1923, Heller was brought up in what he has called "moderate poverty" in a "depressed" residential neighborhood of Coney Island, located on Brooklyn's southern rim.[1] Nearly all the Coney Islanders of his parents' generation were immigrants from Eastern Europe. His mother, Lena, about thirty-eight years of age at his birth, spoke little English; his father, Isaac, roughly the same age as his wife, had emigrated from Russia a decade earlier and earned his living in this country as a bakery truck driver. Isaac Heller suffered from ulcers that his wife attributed to the quantities of bakery cake he consumed. When Joseph was four, in 1927, his father died after an ulcer operation that went wrong. The mother never remarried, and Heller began to think of his brother, Lee—who was fourteen years older and born in Russia—as his father. At the age of eight or nine, in fact, he gave Lee a Father's Day gift with the note, "You're like a father to me." Not until Lee's wedding, when Heller was fifteen, did he

discover that both Lee and Sylvia, his sister, had had a different mother than he, a not uncommon occurrence in immigrant families. This "secret" was the second one to astound and infuriate the boy. Upon his father's death, he was not told what had happened but rather was left to wonder why there were so many people and so much food in the house that day. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that secrets—their concealing and their revealing—are at the heart of every Heller book.[2]

Although he was conscious of being a Jew, Heller did not have a traditional religious upbringing. His father was an agnostic and a Socialist who had fled the czar for the golden opportunities in America. Both parents spoke Yiddish in the home but their youngest child did not celebrate being a bar mitzvah nor did he observe the Jewish holidays except for the once-a-year foray into the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Lena Heller was a bit embarrassed about the family's straying from traditional ways, and her son Joe teased her by calling up to her window from the street, "Hey, Ma. Throw me down a ham sandwich!" After Isaac's death, his wife took in sewing and both Lee and Sylvia went to work upon graduating from high school in order to help support the family. Joe was always known as the exceptionally bright one in the Heller household, ahead of his class in school even at the age of five or six. That Joe rather than Lee or Sylvia would go on for a university degree may have had as much to do with his position in the family as with his intelligence, since it was typical in immigrant Jewish families for the younger, American-born child to get an education while the older siblings entered the labor force.[3]

Heller composed his earliest story, about the Russian invasion of Finland, at ten or eleven years of age, on a neighbor boy's typewriter.[4] He offered it to the *Daily News,* which published one short story a day, but the piece was rejected. Undaunted, he continued writing and submitting fiction to various periodicals, with no luck. His best subject at Abraham Lincoln High School was English Composition. After graduation in 1941 he clerked in the file room of a casualty insurance company, and then, after Pearl Harbor, worked as a blacksmith's helper for a short time at the Norfolk Navy Yard. In 1942, at nineteen, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and spent three years in service, one of them (1944–45) in combat on Corsica with the 488th squadron, 340th Bombardment Group, 12th Air Force. After short service as a public relations officer in San Angelo, Texas, Heller was discharged from the air force as a first lieutenant, with an Air Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation.

Heller had been anxious for combat. Propagandistic war movies and a firm belief in the righteousness of the cause made warfare appear "dramatic and heroic" to this young soldier. In fact, he flew sixty combat missions in a B-25 over Italy and France; but on the thirty-seventh mission, over Avignon, he thought his plane had exploded and consequently was terrified on all his remaining flights. He vowed that if he lived through the war he would avoid airplanes entirely and, at war's end, took a ship back home to the States to prove his point (though he changed his mind about flying in 1960, after enduring a twenty-four-hour train trip from New York to Miami). While overseas Heller kept a diary of his missions, and he also composed short fiction. When stationed in Texas he submitted two of these pieces to *Story* magazine, edited by Whit Burnett. Burnett accepted one—"I Don't Love You Anymore"—for a servicemen's issue in the fall of 1945, when Heller was twenty-two. An account not of this serviceman's martial adventures, but rather of a marital spat in which the husband refuses to put on clothes to greet his company, Heller's first published work was later called by its own author "decidedly inferior." The year 1945 also marked Heller's marriage to Brooklyn native Shirley Held, whom he had met on a weekend furlough at a Catskill Mountains resort. Their two children are Erica, now in her late thirties, and Ted, four years younger, both of them graduates, like their father, of New York University, with interests in writing and film.

After the war, Heller enrolled briefly at the University of Southern California under the GI Bill before transferring, with Whit Burnett's help, to New York University. As a sophomore, at age twenty-three or so, he took a creative writing course with Maurice Baudin, a specialist in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French drama. He submitted for publication the stories that Baudin praised and sold two of them to *Esquire* and two to the *Atlantic Monthly.* One of these—"Castle of Snow"—was included in *The Best Short Stories of 1949.* Deciding he liked the two hundred dollars that the *Atlantic* paid him, he tried for $1,500 from *Good Housekeeping,* but his hack work did not meet with success. Heller was writing a good deal of serious fiction at this time, the mid-1940s, and has characterized his work as "*New Yorker* type stories, by Jewish writers about Jewish life in Brooklyn."[5] Heller's assessment of his early stories does not apply to the ones that saw print: of his publications between 1945 and 1948, only "Castle of Snow" is clearly on the subject of Jews. Reminiscent of Hemingway, especially in their heavy reliance on dialogue, these stories are, on the whole, formulaic (to

use David Seed's word for them); they conform to the type of fiction then being published in such magazines as the *Atlantic, Collier's, Esquire,* and *The New Yorker,* in which a gradual release of information reveals the true subject underneath the surface. Though derivative, these stories obviously contained a spark of something highly original, for by his senior year in college, Heller was already considered one of the country's most promising young writers.[6] And, it should be noted here, the gradual release of information would remain a Heller trademark throughout his career as a novelist.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from NYU in 1948, Heller took a master's in American literature from Columbia University with a thesis entitled "The Pulitzer Prize Plays: 1917–1935."[7] He then studied English literature—especially Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton—at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University, for a year as a Fulbright Scholar, though he seems to have spent a good portion of his time working on a short story. His first job was teaching freshman composition at Pennsylvania State College (now University) for several semesters, but in 1952 he left State College and academics for the more congenial territory of New York's advertising world. For a decade he worked in the "copy and promo" business at *Time* (1952–56), *Look* (1956–58), and *McCall's* (1958–61) magazines, as well as at Remington Rand. As a copywriter at *Time* in 1955, Heller prepared texts for slide shows to assist the advertising-space salesmen in securing business for the magazine. He also worked on his first novel, for which he had begun making notes a couple of years earlier, while at Remington Rand. In fact, the archives of *Story* magazine reveal that Heller was planning a war novel as early as 1945, and that Whit Burnett read four chapters of this work not long afterward. Correspondence between Burnett and Heller suggests that the novel in this form was rather conventional, and that Burnett's advice and encouragement were instrumental in Heller's eventual choice of creative writing as a career. At any rate, Heller had abandoned this novel and the fresh start was apparently leading in a different direction. Although the novel in progress in the mid-fifties was set in World War II, times had changed in the years since D-Day. A new conflict was raging in Korea and the cold war was now a reality. The unified American opinion on war had disintegrated, and the country was shaken and divided over issues ranging from civil rights to nuclear armaments. The main aspect of Heller's new "war novel" true to the war as he had experienced it was the fear of dying in combat. Otherwise the work does not stand up as a

realistic or even interesting record of World War II. Rather, as Heller notes, he "deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, helicopters, IBM machines and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on."

The opening line of the novel, then called *Catch-18* rather than *Catch-22,* came to Heller as he was lying in bed one night in 1955 and thinking of author Louis-Ferdinand Céline.[8] Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) may be said to have ignited Heller, for "Céline did things with time and structure and colloquial speech I'd never experienced before." In that year Heller wrote, rewrote, and published his first chapter, "The Texan," in *New World Writing no. 7,* a quarterly anthology devoted to sections of books in progress. In 1957, Heller's agent sent some 250 pages of the novel to Simon and Schuster, where they were read over a several-month period by a young editorial assistant named Robert Gottlieb (who went on to be president of Alfred A. Knopf and now edits the *New Yorker* magazine). Gottlieb reports that he "didn't know enough" to be wary of such provocative, innovative writing—"I just figured if something were that good, it would eventually become a success," he recounts—and offered Heller a contract to publish, with a $1,500 advance: half on signing and half on acceptance of the manuscript. Heller continued to write his novel in the evenings after work, two or three hours a night, for seven or eight years altogether. "I gave up once and started watching television with my wife," he recalls. "Television drove me back to *Catch-22.* I couldn't imagine what Americans did at night when they weren't writing novels." The flip side to Heller's flippant remark is found in other comments that expose his frustration at the tedious process of eking out a first novel word by precious word, one page a night: "It came so hard I really thought it would be the only thing I ever wrote," he has admitted.

Work continued on this novel when Heller hired on as a copywriter in the marketing division at *Look* in 1960. Uninterested in the business of preparing sales presentations based on numbers or analysis, he poured his energies into his book, on which he often worked behind closed doors with his boss's tacit permission.[9] Finally, when Heller was thirty-eight years old and by then a promotion manager at *McCall's, Catch-18* was completed. Since Leon Uris had recently published a novel called *Mila 18,* Gottlieb came up with the idea of changing Heller's title to *Catch-22* in order to avoid confusion. Both author and editor liked the repetition of number in the new title since it was appropriate to the repetition in the novel

itself. *Catch-22,* much reduced in size from Heller's eight-hundred-page manuscript, was published by Simon and Schuster in September 1961. Its mixed reception is well exemplified by the *New York Times,* which one day described the novel as "gasping for want of craft and sensibility" and the next as "a dazzling performance." In fact, the publication might have caused no stir at all except that S. J. Perelman, in an interview in the *New York Herald Tribune,* mentioned that he had just read a good new book, by Joseph Heller. *Catch-22* never sold enough copies in a single week to appear on the *Times*'s best-seller list, and Heller has said that the novel fulfilled all his fantasies save two: it didn't make him rich and it wasn't on that all-important list. But it did sell thirty-two thousand copies in the first year, and when the paperback came out from Dell in October 1962 it was an immediate hit, with over two million copies sold in one year. Indeed, *Catch-22* has been called "the American counterculture bible of the 1960's."

The year 1962 was a good one for Heller.[10] Columbia pictures bought the movie rights to *Catch-22,* enabling Heller to leave his advertising job at *McCall's.* He was hired to write the screenplay, but waived his right to do so. Instead, he made notes for another book, thereby prompting Robert Gottlieb to take out an announcement: "Joseph Heller is now working on his second novel, *Something Happened.* Publication date not set yet, of course—but look for it sometime before we get to the moon." Six lunar landings later, Heller finally reached his destination in 1974. Of course, there had been much other work in those years. Heller had left the world of "copy and promo," although he began to conceive *Something Happened* while still employed at *McCall's* (and wondered, later, if he thought up his novels in a kind of reverie because the discipline of writing ad copy actually released the imagination in other realms). During the midsixties Heller taught creative writing classes in fiction and drama at the University of Pennsylvania one day a week and at Yale another. In the early 1950s Heller had collaborated on a movie script for Twentieth Century-Fox with a colleague at Penn State College. Described as a spy spoof, "The Trieste Manuscripts" was never produced but it did prepare the way for further work on comedy scripts in the 1960s. These ventures, undertaken solely for money, resulted in several imbroglios of one degree or another. Hired in 1962 to write a pilot script to launch "McHale's Navy," a television series, Heller got involved in a seven-year legal dispute over revisions made without his consent. He went to Hollywood to collaborate on *Sex and the Single Girl,* released in 1964, and found

that the $5,000 a week he received did not quite overcome his dislike of the movie colony's cavalier attitude toward words. After doctoring a number of scenes in the James Bond spoof *Casino Royale* (1967), Heller discovered that several other writers (including Woody Allen) had been working on the script as well. Out of this experience Heller created his own spoof, a comic fiction called "How I Found James Bond, Lost My Self-Respect, and Almost Made $150,000 in My Spare Time," published in *Holiday* magazine in 1967. In style and subject matter this story echoes *Catch-22,* with the director as the "heavy" and finishing the script itself as slippery a mission as completing the requisite number of bombing raids.

No battle scars seem to have been received from Heller's other screen adaptations of the period, his work on his friend George Mandel's novel *The Breakwater* (1960) and his collaboration with Tom and Frank Waldman on *Dirty Dingus Magee* (1970). (Heller was also invited to work on *Doctor Strangelove,* an antiwar send-up of military armament very much in keeping with the tone of *Catch-22.*) But his financial dealings over the movie rights to *Catch-22* again led to a comical commentary, this time on his agent Irving Lazar. Though complimentary of Lazar's accomplishments, the sketch—"Irving Is Everywhere," published in *Show* magazine in 1963—implicitly faults his values (with good reason David Seed draws a comparison to *Catch-22*'s Milo Minderbinder). Although Heller had a mixed reaction to the film version of his first novel, the movie was in fact very good for his career. In mid-1970, with the appearance of Mike Nichols's film version, created from a screenplay by Buck Henry, the novel set a record for paperback sales during one six-week period, though the film itself lost fifteen million dollars and was the financial disaster of the year.[11] (One cannot help noting the Helleresque fact that the pretend martial armaments in the movie constituted the world's twelfth largest bomber force at the time!) The term *catch-22* is now firmly embedded in *Webster's* between *catchpole* and *catchup,* and the novel *Catch-22* is firmly entrenched in the modern literary canon, required reading even at the US Air Force Academy, which hosted a scholarly symposium in 1986 to commemorate the novel's twenty-fifth anniversary. One hears the phrase regularly, in the House of Representatives and on the street. American soldiers in Vietnam are said to have carried copies of the novel in their backpacks. By 1988 the work had sold more than twenty-five million copies and its popularity shows no sign of abating. College students, especially, love it.

In the 1960s Heller also toured the country in opposition to the

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Vietnam War, and was so disgusted with politics that he did not vote for president until George McGovern was the candidate in 1972; indeed, he ran as an anti-Johnson delegate (favoring Eugene McCarthy) in the 1968 presidential primary. He also voted for Senator Keating in New York against Bobby Kennedy because Keating spoke out against American involvement in Vietnam. Heller is so disillusioned with the political process that he has not voted in an election in almost two decades.

Heller's first play, *We Bombed in New Haven,* was begun in the midsixties "as a whim, meant to kill time" in the evening while Heller was working on his novel during the day.[12] No matter what the original motivation, Heller took his task very seriously. Always adept at dialogue, he composed the first draft in six weeks, but then took six months to rewrite. Robert Brustein, dean of the Yale School of Drama, had given *Catch-22* a glowing review in the *New Republic* in 1961; he liked the script of Heller's latest work and offered him a playwright-in-residency for the duration of a Yale production. With the concurrence of the Broadway producer, *We Bombed in New Haven* ran first in New Haven in December 1967, directed by Larry Arrick and performed by a talented cast of students and professionals, including Stacy Keach (Starkey), Ron Liebman (Henderson), and Estelle Parsons (Ruth). Arrick and several of the actors had been associated with the improvisatory group of performers at Second City in Chicago, and they took a freewheeling approach to what they considered a sketchy text. Heller was not exactly pleased by the deviations from his script, and opening night was even more painful than the rehearsals. In Brustein's recollection, "everybody agreed that the performance was brilliant; many had doubts about the play." In truth, assessments of the production *were* mixed, and, on the basis of the review by the influential *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes, Heller revised the text somewhat—making mostly stylistic changes—in preparation for a delayed Broadway opening, starring Jason Robards, on October 16, 1968.

The Broadway run, while not exactly a bomb, was certainly a disappointment. The production lasted only eleven weeks, even though the first six of them had been subsidized by the Theatre Development Fund, which had purchased sixty thousand dollars worth of tickets. Although the initial New York reviews were by and large positive, the two *Times* reviews, by Barnes and Walter Kerr, were highly critical of the play and the out-of-state reviews were negative. Performances in Germany in 1968 received the same mixed reaction. In 1969 and 1971, *We Bombed in New Haven*

played in London, and in 1972 it resurfaced off Broadway (where Clive Barnes saw it yet again). Although not an antiwar play per se—"I'm not interested in the subject of war. . . . It distressed me to see 'We Bombed in New Haven' described as an anti-war play"—Heller's dramatic piece was probably of interest in the years 1968–72 because of America's involvement in the Vietnam conflict. The playwright's feelings about what he called "the monumental atrocity of Vietnam" no doubt lent his work much of its passion and force, and audiences responded in kind. This fervor resulted in a near insurrection at the Yale production. The Yale Draft Refusal Committee had purchased a block of tickets for opening night, but the final scene of the play—in which Starkey seeks a replacement for a dead soldier—offended the more radical students in the audience, who considered it a capitulation to the powers-that-be. They hatched a plot to gather in the orchestra pit during that scene and to disrupt the proceedings by shouting, "Hell no, we won't go," and then running the actors off the stage. Brustein got wind of the plan and, with antiwar satirist Jules Feiffer, interceded during intermission to stave off the outburst. The author himself left New Haven the next day and did not get in touch with Brustein again for years. But he had not had his fill of either playwriting or the subject of war.

The 1960s saw the creation of a second Heller play, a dramatization of *Catch-22* entitled, fittingly enough, *Catch-22: A Dramatization.* Heller got the idea for the play in 1961 and drafted five scenes the following year. Eventually he would eliminate the scene based on Clevinger's trial, in the name of dramatic economy; but he published that scene as a one-act play in 1973. In 1971 Heller produced the final script of *Catch-22* for director Larry Arrick, who put the play on for two weeks in July in an East Hampton theater out on Long Island, New York (where Heller purchased a summer home a few years later and now lives the year round). Much more affirmative of human possibility than *We Bombed in New Haven,* the dramatization of *Catch-22* is more in the spirit of the novel on which it was based than of the novel Heller was near to finishing at the time: *Something Happened.*

In this year, 1971, Heller was Distinguished Visiting Writer at the City College of New York. He stayed on there until early 1975, a full professor teaching fiction to both undergraduates and graduate students. He worked, he said, not for the money as much as for the feedback from the better students. In addition, he remarked, "If I gave up teaching, I would have no time at all for writing. When I was working on *Catch-22,* I had a demanding job during the day. I was

too tired to go out at night, so I wrote *Catch-22*."[13] When *Something Happened* became a best-seller, however, Heller quit teaching and has never returned in a formal sense. Completed in January 1974, Heller's second novel was thirteen years, on and off, in the making. Its opening section had appeared in *Esquire* for September 1966; in it, the main character is named Joe, like his creator (and "Joe's" unnamed place of business is very much like *Time, Inc.*, at which Heller worked in the 1950s). The finished manuscript was some eleven hundred pages, which Heller eventually winnowed down by about one-third for the published version, brought out by Knopf in October 1974. On the basis of Heller's reputation, established by the growing acceptance and popularity of *Catch-22*, and enhanced by the Mike Nichols film of 1970, *Something Happened* was an immediate best-seller and financial success. The two novels, however, are very different, and many readers who had learned to accommodate themselves to the zaniness of the first one (or who were easily drawn to it) were at a loss about what to make of the zaniness of the second, which was of an entirely different order. Heller explained the difference this way: "I put everything I knew about the external world into *Catch-22* and everything I knew about the interior world into *Something Happened*." The two novels are related on a deeper, subtle level, as explorations of what Heller calls "the closeness of the rational to the irrational mind, the location of reality." Appreciation for *Something Happened* has grown steadily since its publication, although initial reviews were, again, mixed, prompting Heller to remark, "Apparently, I don't write books people like a *little*."

Casting about for a subject for his third novel, Heller considered writing on Dunbar, who was "disappeared" in *Catch-22* and would be found suffering from amnesia in this sequel; however, the story went nowhere and Heller abandoned it.[14] He found his subject matter at a reading he gave in Wilmington, Delaware. A member of the audience, in the question-and-answer session afterwards, asked why he had never written on the American-Jewish experience, and Heller responded that he had never thought of it before. On the three-hour train ride from Delaware back to New York, Heller began thinking about it and made notes for his next book. The result was *Good as Gold*, written in a relatively compact period of time and published by Simon and Schuster in March 1979. The novel is a kind of treatise on the hyphen in the phrase "American-Jewish experience." The clash of cultures and conflict between priorities is well captured by the dust jacket, which pictures an American flag sporting one six-pointed star of David among the five-pointed stars. Much comes under attack in this very funny, very bitter novel: anti-Semites, Jews who deny their Jewishness, American politics, shallow materialists and social climbers, Henry Kissinger—above all, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger was not part of the original conception of the book, although Heller had long been vilifying Kissinger publicly; and even now he figures in the novel more as a means of characterizing the main figure, Bruce Gold, than of representing a real-life personage. But gradually political issues became as important to the novel's architecture and theme as religious and cultural ones, resulting in a unique amalgam. So bizarre were some of the current newspaper reports about political figures in the 1970s that Heller appropriated them whole cloth for his novel—the reports *and* the figures—much as years before he had taken a paragraph from a news item about Senator Joseph McCarthy (asking who had dared to promote a major refusing to sign a loyalty oath) and slipped it into a chapter of *Catch-22*. Truth, to Heller, is the stuff of fiction because much of the time it is stranger than anything he can dream up.

Another aspect of *Good as Gold* that harks back to *Catch-22* and is very true to Heller's life (as well as, many would say, to Jewish culture) is its emphasis on food.[15] Called "The Locust" in his *Time* magazine days, because he devoured everything edible, Heller with his friends formed a Gourmet Club in the early 1960s that has lasted more than a quarter of a century. In Coney Island and in the Chinatown section of Manhattan, Heller and his male cronies (wives and girlfriends are usually not welcome) have held their ritualistic gastronomical meetings, engulfing meals of gargantuan proportion, or so it would appear from Heller's descriptions. Bruce Gold shares this gustatory predilection with his creator. Moreover, many of the uproarious dinner table conversations in the novel—the ones, for example, about why ice flows upstream, and how fortunate that this planet has water—were actual debates of the Gourmet Club. Not surprisingly, Heller has formed fast friendships with persons adept at verbal sparring and rhetorical surprises—jokesters like Mel Brooks. His life and art are of a piece in this way, a matter of style.

Not long after the publication of *Good as Gold*, Heller was at work on a novel about King David—*the* King David, but David as one rarely sees him. Three chapters were finished by autumn 1981. At the same time, Heller's marriage was falling apart. His separation from Shirley Held Heller (with his love of language quirks, Heller no

doubt found his wife's name ironic) was followed by a divorce trial in 1983 and a final dissolution of the marriage in 1984, at a cost of some three hundred thousand dollars in professional fees by his own account. This was a price he could ill afford; for in 1981 Heller came down with what was soon diagnosed as Guillain-Barré syndrome, a degeneration of tissues in the peripheral nervous system. He languished for forty-four days at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and one hundred and eight more days at New York University's Rusk Institute, spending more than seventy-three thousand dollars of his own money over the year's course of the acute stage of his illness.

How did Heller arrive at such a sorry state?[16] In December of 1981 he began feeling weak and having some difficulty swallowing, but his minor complaints were ignored by his friends because Heller had always been known as something of a hypochondriac. Only when Heller became unable to remove his sweater, cross his right leg over his left, open his jaws wide enough to tackle a tuna-fish sandwich, or perform a number of other hitherto routine tasks did he realize that something was seriously wrong with him. His doctors' immediate diagnosis was Guillain-Barré, called a syndrome rather than a disease because only its aggregate symptoms and the course they take can verify its existence. It is an illness experienced by a small number of people—fewer than two Americans out of every one hundred thousand come down with it each year—and its severity is different, unpredictably so, in each case. Heller's physicians could not know at the beginning whether he would survive, and whether he would regain his faculties 100 percent if he did so. They could only hope to keep him alive until his body of its own accord stopped producing antibodies that were destroying the myelin sheathes around his nerve fibers.

In *Catch-22,* the goldbricking Yossarian tells Milo Minderbinder that he has Garnett-Fleischaker syndrome, and that "a good Garnett-Fleischaker syndrome isn't easy to come by." Heller's Guillain-Barré wasn't easy to come by either, given the odds against it, especially if one did not have the swine flu shot that was associated with it in the seventies. To quote another wag, Heller's friend Mario Puzo, "When they name any disease after two guys, it's got to be terrible!" Unlike Yossarian—who, after all, was only kidding about his syndrome—Heller was terribly ill for many months. Unable to swallow, he was fed by a tube in his nose and had secretions cleared from his mouth by a suction tube. His speech was slurred, his breath short. By the fifth day after his admission to the hospital he could

not sit up. And gradually he got worse. With tubes in his orifices and patients dying around him, Heller must have felt something like his own soldier in white from *Catch-22,* lacking only the mummylike bindings and the garrulous Texan (though he did have Mel Brooks to drive him to distraction with conversation). Certainly his friends noticed the resemblance to Heller's fictional character.

Within a short period of time—just a couple of weeks—Heller deteriorated physically as much as he was going to; but, though his Guillain-Barré was stable, he was increasingly depressed about his condition and the prospects of a prolonged hospital stay. Heller saw a psychiatrist regularly and, with his saving sense of humor, "found him useful even when discussing such trivial problems as the Oedipal complex, repetition compulsions, the impact on children of the death of parents, and the character and psychology" of some of the specialists on the case. Soon he began to improve, and after three weeks in intensive care he was moved into a private room. One of his new nurses was Valerie Humphries, who understood his muffled speech, laughed at his jokes, and liked food as much as he did—a winning combination of attributes. Three weeks later, Nurse Humphries moved over to the Rusk Institute when her patient was transferred there for rehabilitation.

By the time Heller was stricken with Guillain-Barré he had written 325 pages of *God Knows.* He may have derived inspiration from that manuscript for his courtship of Valerie, for the inscription on the Valentine's Day cake he gave her in 1982 reads, "Will you be OUR concubine?" (The "our" was a reference to Heller's friend Speed Vogel, who played John Alden to Valerie's Priscilla Mullins since Heller was paralyzed at that time.) At some point during his hospitalization Heller had the draft sent to Bob Gottlieb at Knopf, who liked what he read and gave him the go-ahead without asking for a description of the rest of the book. The contract, drawn up while Heller was a patient at Rusk, contained generous terms: an income for two years whether the manuscript was finished or not. Heller moved to his East Hampton, L.I., house after his discharge in late spring 1982, and there he finished his novel within the next year and a half. The book was published in October 1984, and Heller was well enough to make an around-the-world promotional tour with Valerie in the fall of 1985. After a courtship of some four years, Heller married Valerie Humphries in April 1987. Yossarian never had it so good with Nurse Duckett.

An article written by Speed Vogel for the *New York Times,* about "Helping a Convalescent Friend (in Style)," and a subsequent inter-

view with Heller in *People* magazine, resulted in a flood of letters to East Hampton and a surge of interest in Heller's bout with Guillain-Barré. Vogel began to consider writing a book about his experiences with his friend's illness, to be called *Poor Speed, His Friend Joe Is Sick,* but the friend himself got into the act as coauthor. According to Heller, *No Laughing Matter,* published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in February 1986, with alternating chapters by Heller and Vogel, is not a "medical book" but "more a story about friendship."[17] It is also a story about divorce, and a means for letting off some steam at lawyers. Although readers curious about, or touched in some way by, Guillain-Barré syndrome will find much in the book to hold their attention, *No Laughing Matter* is of greatest merit to the Heller aficionado because, in lieu of a biography or autobiography, it is the most sustained portrait to date (other than his novels) of the man's personality and relationships. The interplay among Heller's cronies—the wisecracking, the horseplay, the insults, the affection—is as entertaining as any borscht belt routine . . . as any Heller novel, for that matter. And, like the humor in Heller's novels, it is a way of holding despair at arm's length. The alternating chapters set up intriguing contrasts in perspective (Heller's catastrophe is Vogel's meal ticket) and also highlight the ironical approach to an important subtext: death. Speed Vogel's concluding section, which depicts in sentimental terms the demise of Joseph Heller, is counterpointed by Heller's vigorous denial of that ending. As David Seed cogently analyzes this section of *No Laughing Matter,* "The serious point behind this textual joking is that the possibility that Heller might die (in the background throughout the first part of the book) is now made explicit as comic fiction which simultaneously confronts the possibility and drains it of serious threat."[18]

Speed Vogel would have us believe that Heller's personality underwent a sea change in combat with that mild case of Guillain-Barré. He reports, "Before Heller's big affliction, his close and dear friends used to commiserate with each other about his exceptional impatience, rudeness, insensitivity, selfishness, arrogance, duplicity, obstinacy, malevolence, insincerity, negativity, and general unpleasantness. We liked him . . . but we were extremely hard put to explain why." Afterwards, in Vogel's view, Heller became a nice guy. Heller himself reports that life became uncomplicated and uncluttered when he retired to East Hampton to get better: "My problems were few and I knew what they were."[19] One tends to doubt that this *harmonious* side to Heller has survived his convalescence, at least not intact. And one almost hopes that it has not.

Now, Joseph Heller is almost completely back to his old physical self. A slight facial paralysis distorts his speech somewhat, and his gait is not always steady, but he is on the college circuit once again, giving readings in his pronounced Brooklyn accent with his lifelong slight speech impediment and hint of a stammer. His fifth novel, at one point entitled *Poetics,* was published by G. P. Putnam's in September 1988. Called *Picture This,* the novel is set in both ancient Athens and seventeenth-century Holland, and has for its central character Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle contemplating a bust of Homer. The frame allows Heller the freedom he always desires, to reflect on more than one time period and even location at once. Heller's assessment of his work in progress—"inevitably and almost in spite of myself, it's becoming a book about money and war"[20]—is an accurate description of the finished book. But the tone of the novel, bitter and pessimistic, is very different from Heller's attitude in *Catch-22.* Another novel, certain to be about money and war as well, is a sequel to *Catch-22,* contracted to Simon and Schuster, publisher of that first Heller work (perhaps Dunbar will surface after all, suffering from amnesia). Heller has reread *Catch-22* in preparation for the task, taking notes and making extracts, but he insists that the new novel has to exist independently of the first. Published portions of this sequel reveal Heller's continuing preoccupation with political mayhem and societal decay.[21]

Joseph Heller is now approaching threescore and ten. He has taken his own (bitter)sweet time to write his five novels to date, but his major works of fiction are coming with increasing speed the older he gets. After a lifetime of hypochondria and compulsive jogging and dieting—"I'm preoccupied with death, disease, and misfortune," Heller said in 1973—he has conquered illness and debilitation and is writing energetically in East Hampton. He plans not only the sequel to *Catch-22* but also another nonfiction collaboration with Speed Vogel, this one about their contrasting childhoods in New York. Unlike his King David, Heller is not a lonely old man looking back on his deathbed over a life filled with disappointments, fearful of dying yet sick of living. He says that he is in "the twilight of [his] career," yet perhaps now, more than ever, he would echo the sentiments voiced to an interviewer over a decade ago: "I've come to look upon death the same way I look upon root canal work. Everyone else seems to get through it all right, so it couldn't be too difficult for me."[22]

2

"Words Cannot Express. . . .": *Catch-22* and the Language of Deficiency

Catch-22 aficionados enjoy comparing and reading aloud their favorite funniest parts of the novel. One of the most humorous and outrageous of these is the form letter of condolence that Corporal Whitcomb devises and finally succeeds in sending—over the chaplain's objections and Colonel Cathcart's signature—to loved ones on the home front. Doc Daneeka's wife receives this missive in her Staten Island mailbox:

> 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.[1]

That Mrs. Daneeka has already received (1) a telegram from the War Department announcing her husband's death, (2) a letter from her husband asserting his corporeality, and (3) her own letter to her husband in response, returned unopened with the phrase KILLED IN ACTION—and that Doc Daneeka was not only *not* killed in action but is not even dead—only contributes to the convoluted comedy of the situation, mirrored in the rhetoric of the form letter. Words are barely able to express the full range of zany complexity that Heller attempts to capture in this novel, much less the appropriate response of the human mind to death. In *Catch-22* Heller uses a language of deficiency to expose not only the gaping holes in the fabric of society but also the inability of language to give voice to outrage at the human condition.

As a novelist, words are Heller's only avenue for communicating with the reader, but he uses them to reveal the frequent inadequacy of words to convey meaning. *Catch-22* begins with a cliché, "It was love at first sight," but, lest the reader sit back at this point, lulled into expectations of a conventional and predictable romance, the

next line provides a jolt: "The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him." At every turn, Heller disorients the reader by jarring language. Yossarian laments that "there's no patriotism . . . and no matriotism, either." A hospitalized colonel (who, ironically, is in Communications) has many specialists at his bedside, including "a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma [and] . . . a pathologist for his pathos." Words, Heller reminds the reader, do not necessarily capture reality. Language is artificial and gratuitous, and on occasion it misleads.

But language also amuses, and therefore Yossarian, Heller's hero, enjoys playing games with it. When he tires of censoring letters, he entertains himself by one day striking out all the adverbs and adjectives, another day all the articles. When that excitement pales, Yossarian blacks out everything *but* the articles, thereby creating "dynamic interlinear tensions" and leaving messages "far more universal." When signing his own name becomes monotonous, he substitutes the name Washington Irving and then Irving Washington. So, too, Heller delights in word games for their own sake, drawing variations on the interplay between John Milton and Milton John like a poet finding fresh ways to use the tools at his disposal. He is intrigued by the limitless possibilities for diversion that language affords, and unconcerned with those who will actually receive Yossarian's censored letters and scratch their heads in puzzlement.[2]

The author's joy in language and lack of concern with realism as a literary mode are hallmarks of this novel. Certain names have cartoonish character befitting the one-dimensional personages they label: P. P. Peckem, for example, or Scheisskopf (shithead) and Popinjay (parrot). Heller goes so far as to have General Peckem wonder of Scheisskopf what sort of shithead the Pentagon had foisted on him, so that the reader might more easily catch his little joke. Major Major Major Major as someone's real name only strains credulity this side of the looking glass; through the mirror, as it were, it makes perfect sense.[3] The near rhymes of Chaplain Tappman and Yossarian the Assyrian join a most unlikely assemblage of total rhymes trumpeted proudly in Heller's litany of Milo's purchases: cork from New York, shoes from Toulouse, ham from Siam, nails from Wales, and—in case one thinks that Heller can deal only in monosyllables—tangerines from New Orleans, the crowning triumph. Alliteration—a literary device to which Heller is

prone—also draws attention to the language of the novel: a day's delay deepens, for example, and people whine, whimper, and wheedle.

Heller's use of the occasional esoteric vocabulary word leads the reader to conclude that the description of General Peckem applies equally well to the novelist: "The skilled choice of words he was exercising was exquisitely titillating" (p. 316). Stashed lovingly among the sentiments expressed largely in a prosaic manner are such nuggets as these: the Texan's *infundibuliform* jowls, Nurse Duckett's *callipygous* ass, Chief White Halfoat's *calcareous* gray face, Colonel Cathcart's *farinaceous* cheeks, Colonel Korn's *crepuscular* jowls, Nately's whore's *otiose* boredom, Colonel Cathcart's *parturient* silence. Heller's polysyllabic vocabulary marks him as a subversive on the order of the corporal whom Captain Black distrusts because he uses words like *panacea* and *utopia*.

Heller achieves similar subversive effects with his clichés. Although not above such standard fare as "no end in sight," "twinkling of an eye," and "fit as a fiddle," he surprises the reader by occasionally literalizing his clichés, as when Snowden spills his secret. Doc Daneeka says to Yossarian, "One hand washes the other. Know what I mean? You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Yossarian proceeds to scratch Doc's back, though he knows full well what Daneeka means and, in fact, has already entered his name on McWatt's flight log so Daneeka can accumulate missions without actually going up in a plane. Another literalizing of a figure of speech occurs when Milo says that Polish sausage is going for peanuts in Cracow; in this case, sausage *is* being traded for peanuts. The effect on the reader of these clichés, as of the arcane vocabulary words, is to force his attention onto the meaning of words. Otherwise, one becomes numb to all the empty language. So many of the novel's characters speak in clichés that language becomes empty of meaning unless the listener is jarred into a new understanding. General Peckem sends daily bulletins to Pianosa from the mainland, headed by "such cheery homilies as 'Procrastination is the Thief of Time' and 'Cleanliness is Next to Godliness.' " Colonel Cargill—an ad man in civilian life—exhorts his troops, "Men, you're American officers. The officers of no other army in the world can make that statement. Think about it." (That he is talking to the enlisted men, not the officers, makes the reader think about it.) In "Love, Dad," a short sequel to *Catch-22* (and a revised portion of the original manuscript), Nately's Dad sends letters full of platitudes to Nately at Andover. These clichés live on after young Nately dies.[4]

Probably the most salient aspect of the rhetoric of *Catch-22*, readily identifiable with Joseph Heller, is repetition. A typical Heller construction comes at the beginning of the novel, when Yossarian says to the chaplain, "As far as I know, I'm the only Captain Yossarian I know, but that's only as far as I know." Here are three uses of "I know," one of which is contained in "As far as I know," of which phrase there are two in the sentence. The conversation immediately preceding this one repeats the word *good*, then *bad;* the one immediately following turns on *chaplain*, the next on *uncomfortable*, and on into *in other words*. In other words, Heller uses many of the same elements over and over again, so that conversations seem to go nowhere. There are lots of words but few new elements, few *other* words—only recombinations of a singularly sparse vocabulary. The novel proceeds by repetition in the narrative as well as in the dialogue. Heller repeats five times, in five sentences, that Yossarian is just short of jaundice. "There was no end in sight. The only end in sight was Yossarian's own" is part of the overall repetitive mode creating the effect that there is no end in sight for the reader.

Indeed, Heller emphasizes repetition repetitively. Characters see things twice (Giuseppe), do things twice (drop bombs over Ferrara), and experience things twice (the chaplain's déjà vu). Major Major Major Major has a name that's twice doubled. In some editions of the novel, Major—de Coverley's name is composed of two dashes, not one. Certain tasks are performed in a seemingly endless circularity: Orr tinkers with his stove, ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen digs and fills holes, the soldier in white's bottles are exchanged until he "dies." The meaning of the phrase *Catch-22*—basically, the "catch" that denies the solution to a problem—is repeated with variation. The novel itself lurches forward by incremental repetition, with a few more details of a situation added each time Heller presents it again. A primary example of incremental repetition is the central event of the novel, which Yossarian remembers over and over again, each time allowing a few more of the horrific details to creep in: that is, the death of Snowden over Avignon.

Heller himself has noted of his readers that "if they *don't* like the book, it's repetitious; if they *like* it, it has a recurring and cyclical structure, like the theme in a Beethoven symphony."[5] Critic James Mellard, who likes the book a great deal, explains convincingly that déjà vu functions in the novel to indicate the lag between seeing and understanding, between perception and comprehension.[6] Although readers might feel, in the immortal words of Yogi Berra, that "It's

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