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Catch-22 and the Triumph of the Absurd

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

CATCH-22 AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE ABSURD

submitted by

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Paul Eluard par Fernand Léger, 1949

UNA SALUS VICTIS NULLAM SPERARE SALUTEM – Virgil

It all started with a bang. By the time of Joseph Heller's 1961 release of *Catch-22*, years of fighting two brutal World Wars had changed Europe not only politically and geographically, but also ideologically. After WWI, Germany, burdened by the Treaty of Versailles, turned to National Socialism and a leader who led them into one of the darkest eras in all of human history. The abbeys of London lay in tatters after the blitzkrieg, and the attack on Pearl Harbor prompted America's involvement in the war. To the frozen forests of the Ardennes we went. In the Pacific islands we hopped across blood-soaked bunkers until we reached Japan. America had its fair share of problems on the home front as well. In 1929 the stock market crashed and America sank into the Great Depression. The 1950s found America in the midst of a Cold War with the Soviet Union and battered by a bout of McCarthyism. All the while, American writers were traveling to Europe and returning years later with stories to tell. These American writers had many different reasons for venturing off to that volatile continent: Ernest Hemingway (Oak Park, IL) drove ambulances for the Allied Powers during WWI; F. Scott Fitzgerald (St. Paul, MN) needed care for his mentally unstable wife Zelda (Montgomery, AL); Joseph Heller (Brooklyn, NY) was stationed in Corsica to fly sixty missions for the U.S. Army Air Corps in 1944; James Baldwin (Harlem, NY) ventured to Paris to escape American racism and homophobia. The template at the time was simple: born in the States, traveled to Europe, returned with an idea for a novel. These round-trip adventures, these *aller-retours* of American writers, caused a torrent of great literature throughout the twentieth century. *Catch-22*, and post-war American fiction like it, are not distinctly American *despite* drawing from European ideas, experiences and cultures, they are distinctly American *because* they do so.

As Heller and other American writers made their ways back to the United States, they kept a bit of European culture with them. Although the most prominent philosophical influences in *Catch-22* come from the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Irishmen such as Samuel Beckett and Germans such as Franz Kafka make appearances as well, reminding us that feeling as though the world is an absurd and meaningless place is not an individual malady, but rather a condition of all humanity.

There was widespread prominence of existentialist ideas in Western literature during the 1900s, and, as is recognized in literary criticism of the time, it seems as if existentialism lends itself well to art. The two essentially go hand-in-hand. Thomas Flynn notes in “Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction” that existentialists put significance on our feelings and emotions, while many philosophers did not take such things into consideration. Flynn writes, “This sets them [the existentialists] immediately in likely dialogue with creative artists, who trade on our emotional and imaginative lives. In fact, the relation between existentialism and the fine arts has been so close that its critics have often dismissed it as solely a literary movement” (Flynn 7).

Before we move along in this discussion of the absurd in literature and of existentialism, I would like to create a benchmark for which I will be judging the works of the previously mentioned authors. In his 1968 article on *Catch-22*, Brian Way addressed the metaphysics of his essay in a way that I find fitting to my own work. Of Sartre, Beckett, Kafka, Camus he writes: “The metaphysical assumptions which these writers generally speaking share are that events occur in a manner which is arbitrary or contingent and that human experience far from presenting an orderly sense of continuity

is dislocate—directed by a principle of irrelevance and non-reason, if by any principle at all” (Way 258). It is by this measure that I judge my works existentialist. This is not an essay in philosophy; no, it is a dialogue between literature and philosophy. Therefore, to define “Existentialism” without acknowledging its connection to literature would be misleading for my purposes of analysis.

It is how Heller dramatizes the human condition that separates his work from mere descriptive philosophy. *Catch-22* transcends the war-novel genre in that it is an illustration of the absurdity of war, and even more so of life itself. Even in how the novel is written, with its mindless repetition of words, labyrinthine chronology, and circular logic games, *Catch-22* defies convention. Pivotal events such as Snowden’s death are referred to numerous times until Heller discloses to us the full story. Heller’s words drip with the bitter irony of existence. What is humorous on page one becomes horrifying by the final chapter. For Heller, the novel itself is Sartre’s chestnut tree, Camus’ boulder pushed up a hill, Kafka’s trial, Beckett’s unseen Godot. *Catch-22* challenges our preconceived notion that a novel should follow a chronological line of action and that the conflict in a novel should be resolved. Heller plays with form; he plays with chronology and time; he defies convention in ways that are reflective of the schools of thought that were popular during his lifetime.

More importantly, Joseph Heller’s novel proves that one can triumph over this existential predicament, as shown by the actions of the character of Orr, and less definitively, in the character of Yossarian. My essay will outline certain mythic structures within *Catch-22*. For example: Replace Sisyphus with Yossarian in Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In the Greek myth, Sisyphus is punished for doing a few things wrong.

First, he told secret information about the abduction of Aegina to people he should not have. Secondly, according to Homer at least, Sisyphus put Death in chains. Lastly, after Sisyphus dies and lives in the underworld a while, Pluto grants Sisyphus permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. Upon this opportunity, Sisyphus is lured by the water, sun, and sea of the warm and hospitable earth. He refuses to go back to the underworld. Mercury, hearing about Sisyphus' desertion, goes to get him. As punishment Sisyphus must push a heavy boulder up to the summit of a large hill. When Sisyphus reaches this point the boulder rolls back down the hill to its initial starting place. This "futile and hopeless labor" will continue for an eternity, as Sisyphus must forevermore push his boulder up the hill only to watch it fall back down (*Myth of Sisyphus* 88-89).

Yossarian, the protagonist of *Catch-22*, faces a similarly Absurd situation. Stationed in Pianosa, a tiny (fictional) island off of the coast of Italy, Yossarian and his squadron must fly bombing missions in the Mediterranean during WWII. Every time that Yossarian gets close to flying the number of missions required to complete his tour of duty, a man by the name of Colonel Cathcart raises the requirement. Thus, Yossarian is seemingly trapped, forced by Colonel Cathcart to fly bombing missions over enemy territory for all of eternity, or at least until the war ends. A rule called Catch-22 helps Colonel Cathcart to perpetuate this absurd reality. Catch-22 states, "a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind" (46). Therefore, if you ask to be grounded from a mission you clearly aren't insane because you understand the risks involved. Crazy soldiers can be grounded: all they have to do is ask. However, they will never ask because they are crazy and do not realize the dangers involved in each mission. There are many instances of this sort of

“spinning reasonableness,” but this example is perhaps the most important and frequently cited, as it, at the very least, is the “catch” after which Heller named his novel.

So how well does Yossarian parallel Sisyphus? The answer is: not completely. While Sisyphus embraces his absurd condition, Yossarian is looking for a way out of his. However, they both exist in absurd scenarios. Sisyphus must spend eternity pushing a boulder up a hill and watching it roll down again. Comparatively, Yossarian must fly a seemingly infinite amount of missions, most of which put him in the line of fire. Yossarian’s fate could end on any of his missions. Yet, if this does not happen and Yossarian survives the war, we must ask ourselves: “Does ‘Catch-22’ continue after the war ends?”

Orr, who represents the triumph over the absurd, crashes his plane on almost every mission. The men of the 256th squadron think he is either insane or just a bad pilot, and Yossarian even goes as far as to ask never to fly with Orr again. Little do they know that Orr is planning something brilliant. The seemingly infantile Orr, with crab apples stuffed in his cheeks, has actually been practicing landing his plane in the water. After 18 “crashes,” Orr can make the plane touch down like a butterfly with sore feet. Then, after a long conversation with Yossarian earlier in the day, Orr’s plane goes down in the waters off the coast of Italy. Alone in a life raft, Orr drifts away from the rest of his crew, all of which survived the crash. A search and rescue team comes for them, but Orr has drifted out of sight. We spend the next 131 pages assuming that Orr is dead. Suddenly, with only four pages left in the entire novel, Major Danby enters Yossarian’s hospital room with some good news. Orr has washed ashore in Sweden, taking asylum in the neutral country. Orr will take center stage when I examine how he strays so far from the

stock existentialist fiction character written by the likes of Sartre and Camus. For one thing, Orr is successful in combating the absurd; he escapes to neutral territory. This is unique in a genre of literature that is usually so grim. Perhaps this glimmer of hope is uniquely American.

In this paper, I would like to put Albert Camus and Joseph Heller in conversation with each other. By grappling with the questions inherent in a “physical survival against exterior forces or institutions that want to destroy life or moral self,”¹ Heller himself provides a framework for the discussion and analysis of *Catch-22*. All the while, the existentialists will chime in, bringing into the dialogue their opinions and thoughts on the matter. At stake is a better understanding of Heller’s *Catch-22* and post-war literature. We should see *Catch-22* as more than an anti-war novel. It should not be reduced by that title. As Kennard writes in his article “Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity,” there are “wider implications” to Heller’s work. These go beyond philosophy: “But there are numerable contemporary novels which are fundamentally Existentialist. What is interesting about *Catch-22* is that the experimental techniques Heller employs have a direct relation to Existentialist ideas; they are an attempt to ‘dramatize’ his view of the human condition rather than merely describe it” (Kennard 76). *Catch-22* is a dramatization of the absurd in style, in underlying ideology, and in the literary form of the novel itself.

This paper will not follow a linear or chronological order, for the absurd and circular structure of *Catch-22* does not lead itself to step-by-step analysis. What we will have instead is a literary “connect the dots” game. What at first will seem like initially

¹ Paris Review “The Art of Fiction No.51” Winter 1974, No. 60

unconnected events will by the end, if I am successful in my analysis, create a clear image for the reader, a literary reflection. Sections will be set aside for the breaking down of characters and their cross-references in existentialist literature. Themes such as “Trials” and “The Passing of Time” will be isolated and examined. Lastly, it will be suggested that Heller’s writing itself, particularly in his use of dialogue, is structured in an absurd fashion.

There will be two chapters in this paper. The first will argue for *Catch-22* as an Absurd and Existentialist novel. By making parallels to the works of Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Beckett and others, I hope to draw a clear connection between Heller and the existentialist and absurdist writers. In my view, Heller shares much in common with these men. One often finds the protagonist in absurd situations in each of their novels—think of Josef K. in *The Trial* (1925) or Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Many of these protagonists question the meaning of life either directly or indirectly. The latter would concern Meursault of Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938). The former would best be represented through Camus’ *The Rebel*. The main characters to be examined in *Catch-22* are Yossarian and Orr, as they are the characters that most tangibly struggle against the absurd. However, Milo, Nately’s Whore, Dunbar and the Chaplain all provide important supporting roles and will take the stand for a literary cross-examination as well.

The second chapter will show how these absurdities were conquered in the novel. It will primarily focus on Orr, as he is the only character who successfully conquers the absurd situation under which he lives. His triumph is critical in my analysis of what differentiates *Catch-22* from traditional, European existentialism. Yossarian will be ever-

present in these chapters, but the emphasis will be taken off of him greatly. Orr did what Yossarian could not; Orr escaped. We leave Yossarian during a leap of faith, but we do not know if he succeeds in overcoming his absurd situation. Orr, on the other hand, has conquered his absurd world. There is proof of his triumph in the form of the exciting news that Major Danby tells Yossarian in the hospital during the final scene in Heller's novel.

Finally, I would like to examine the triumph over the absurd as a reasonable alternative to the ultimate acceptance of the absurd. Although Camus urges us to picture Sisyphus happy, should we? If Orr can create a way out, an escape from the absurd, why not try his way instead? Then again, Orr is in many ways a ridiculous personage of a man. Similarly, Sisyphus is today as much a myth as a reality. Perhaps Orr is the same.

CHAPTER ONE: GENEALOGY

Catch-22 is enmeshed with symbols, setting and motifs taken from Existentialist and Absurdist texts. There is a genealogy of existential ideas to be found within *Catch-22*, a cross-fertilization of common cultural concerns put forth by the existentialist thinkers themselves and carried on in a unique and distinctly American way by Heller. My analysis will rest on these structures so as to prove that *Catch-22* carries strong Absurdist and Existentialist tendencies, setting the groundwork for the study of Yossarian and Orr as Absurd heroes. As *Catch-22* is a novel of characters, it is best to link Heller's colorful troupe of personages with their doppelgangers inhabiting other novels by the likes of Sartre and Camus. Additionally, setting and scenery are the canvas on which Heller paints some of his most memorable scenes. It is not hard to see, then, that in creating these lively landscapes, Heller found inspiration in past works of Existentialism and Absurdism. Lastly, certain themes or motifs arise throughout *Catch-22* that are strikingly similar to texts from our Absurdist and Existentialist authors. Let us examine some of them here.

The Passing of Time

The first and strongest thematic link between Heller's characters and some of Sartre's characters in *The Age of Reason* is that they both seek to actively prolong their lives. Existentialism hinges largely on time and space, so it is only natural that the passing of time is prominent in both texts. "For the existentialist, the value and meaning of each temporal dimensions of lived time is a function of our attitudes and choices...If

time is of the essence, and the existentialist will insist that it is, then part of who we are is our manner of living the 'already' and the 'not yet' of our existence, made concrete by how we handle our immersion in the everyday ” (Flynn 5-6). In these instances we are dealing with the present and the future. Sartre’s and Heller’s characters must come to terms with their existence in the present and their awareness of a future. Much like Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, it is nearly impossible to understand what it is like to be in the present. As soon as we become aware, we move on to another moment in time. As Catalano argues in his commentary on Sartre’s sense of temporality, “Upon examination, however, the being of the present escapes us and finally is revealed as affected with nothingness” (Catalano 116). Dragged along by consciousness, we move inevitably towards a future. In existentialist texts, it is the burden of this uncertain future that seems to drive the characters mad.

Scenes in which characters consider their futures are often great hunting ground for existentialist themes. Sartre’s vision of the future, as explained by Catalano, “must arise from a being that is its own future” (Catalano 117). He continues, “To be conscious, consciousness must be separated from itself, it must flee itself, to be present to itself. But, Sartre repeats, this flight of consciousness...must not be envisioned as an achieved reality” (Catalano 117). To have the freedom of a future is a great burden on man. We often envision meeting up with ourselves in the future. This is called the “flight from being,” and it overwhelms us with a continual possibilization of the possible” (Catalano 119). Our memories (Snowden’s death, parades in training camp) organize time in a continuum in order to make sense of our lives. Yet, the paradox is that we are continually present, always within the frame of a past and present. Heller’s use of “foreshadowing

flashbacks,” to borrow Burnhan’s term, mimics the human mind’s faculties of memory by describing out-of-order snippets of tragic situations (like Snowden’s death). Upon returning us to the narrative, Heller creates a thematic effect that evokes the fragility of our sense of time. “The result is the paradox of suspense through flashbacks...an ingenious fusion of time planes into the simultaneity of existential time, a fusion entirely consistent with what seems to me the fundamental existential theme of the work”(Burhans 240). Time, once considered to be something so reliable, is brought to trial, interrogated like Clevinger. This discontinuation of time and language that Heller creates within *Catch-22* allows us to examine the difference between reality and illusion (Davis 75).

Examples of this conflict of the passing of time run rampant in *Catch-22*. Take for example the instance in which Dunbar and Clevinger are shooting skeet. This vignette comes at a point early in the book when rapid dialogue and humor are commonplace. It begins on Colonel Cathcart’s private skeet-shooting range:

Dunbar loved shooting skeet because he hated every minute of it and the time passed so slowly. He had figured out that a single hour on the skeet-shooting range with people like Havermeyer and Appleby could be worth as much as eleven-times-seventeen years.

“Do you know how long a year takes when it’s going away?” Dunbar repeated to Clevinger. “This long.” He snapped his fingers. “A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you’re an old man [...] You’re inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age? A half minute

before that you were stepping in to high school, and an unhooked brassiere was as close as you ever hoped to get to Paradise. Only a fifth of a second before that you were a small kid with a ten-week summer vacation that lasted a hundred thousand years and still ended too soon. Zip! They go rocketing by so fast. How the hell else are you ever going to slow time down?" Dunbar was almost angry when he finished. (39)

You are correct to hear inklings of Beckett in this scene as well. It is hard to deny that Dunbar's monologue is unlike that of Pozzo's famous "They give birth astride of a grave" speech in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's most famous play involves minimal scenery and absurd dialogue between characters. Oftentimes Vladimir and Estragon's conversations seem to be individual monologues related only in that they are spoken in proximity to one another. In the play, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting by a tree to meet with the mysterious Godot, a mythic man who, as we eventually come to realize, will never come to see them. They are therefore wishing for something that will never come; they believe in something that likely does not exist. Pozzo and his friend Lucky are passing through on the nearby road. They stop to converse with Vladimir and Estragon. While most of their conversations are ridiculous, nonsensical, even downright silly, without warning the loudmouthed Pozzo breaks into an impassioned speech.

POZZO:

[Suddenly furious] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same

second, is that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (*Waiting For Godot* 333)

Now let us bring to light a few scenes from *The Age of Reason* so as to link the two books thematically. Sartre's 1945 novel *The Age of Reason*, centers around the relationship between a professor named Mathieu and his lover Marcelle. Destitute yet in need of an abortion for the recently pregnant Marcelle, Mathieu must scrounge around Bohemian, left-bank Paris to find a solution, but more importantly to find "freedom." Mathieu fights against the responsibilities that he must uphold for the well being of Marcelle, to whom he feels obligated yet at the same time trapped in his own mess. In particular, a scene at a club with the Russian man named Boris and the performer named Lola proves very useful. Boris is feeling overwhelmed with the thought of growing older. His youth is slipping away from him. To stop this, Boris wishes something crazy: to slow himself down. Sartre writes:

[...] And every instant that passed, every instant, consumed a little more of his youth. "If only I could save myself up, live very quietly, at a slower pace, I should perhaps gain a few years..." (*The Age of Reason* 41)

Mathieu, sitting at a café with Ivich, another one of his lovers, has the same sense about him. The scene follows:

[...] suddenly he was conscious of a bad taste in his mouth and he realized how deep was his attachment to Ivich. It was true that she had no future: Ivich at thirty, Ivich at forty, didn't make any sense. There was nothing

ahead of her. When Mathieu was alone or when he was talking to Daniel or Marcelle, his life stretched out before him, plain and monotonous: a few women, a few holidays, a few books. A long and gentle slope, Mathieu was moving slowly, slowly down it; indeed, he often found himself wishing that the process could be speeded up. (*The Age of Reason* 71)

Lastly, Mathieu comes to terms with the passing of time later on in *The Age of Reason*. Though it is not a perfect conclusion—he remains “ill at ease” by the dilemma of the transience of youth—he has found a way to cope”

“...When all is said, my face in wrinkled, I’ve got the skin of a crocodile and cramp in my muscles, but I still have years left to live...I begin to believe that it’s the likes of us who have been young. We tried to be men, and very silly we were, but I wonder whether the sole means of preserving one’s youth isn’t to forget it.” (*The Age of Reason* 282)

Dunbar comes to his own conclusion as well. In a discussion Dr. Stubbs in front of the medical tent, Dunbar encourages the doctor to keep healing the soldiers despite the fact that death is imminent on the eve of a big mission. Again, it is an incomplete theory, but it helps to deal with the absurdities of life. Stubbs begins:

“There is not light. I don’t feel like starting my generator. I used to get a big kick out of saving people’s lives. Now I wonder what the hell’s the point, since they all have to die anyway.”

“Oh, there’s a point, all right,” Dunbar assured him.

“Is there? What is the point?”

“The point is to keep them from dying for as long as you can.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point, since they all have to die anyway?”

“The trick is not to think about that.”

“Never mind the trick. What the hell’s the point?”

Dunbar pondered in silence for a few moments. “Who the hell knows?”

(109-10)

No matter whether or not they wish to speed up time or slow it down, many characters in *Catch-22* and *The Age of Reason* are concerned with the passing of time. It is time that torments all of the characters in a different way. Sartre’s female characters, portrayed quite negatively, obsess over looking younger and masking their age. Heller’s characters, often stuck in-between missions, wish for time to slow down so that they can stay out of harm’s way for as long as possible. But, as we will see with Nately’s Whore, death can strike at any moment. So, we are silly men, to quote Sartre, to worry about such things as death and the preservation of youth. Mathieu and Yossarian are fascinated by health, finding the human body so fragile that it is almost a miracle that we all don’t drop dead on the spot. If it is not enough that German soldiers are trying to kill him (and Milo’s bomb squad for that matter), Yossarian notes that his body is absurdly constructed to fail. “There were billions of conscientious body cells oxidating away day and night like dumb animals at their complicated job of keeping him alive and healthy, and every one of them was a potential traitor and foe” (172). Note here that Heller gives these “cells” a consciousness. The cells, tissues and organs that make up Yossarian’s body are as much

alive as the whore that is trying to kill him or the nurse whose ass he is grabbing. All are out to kill him; yet, only one will get to do it.

The Soldier as the Ideal Existential Character

An interesting point of comparison arrives when the subject of war is brought up in *The Age of Reason*. The most striking difference between Heller's character of Dunbar and Sartre's Mathieu is that the former is a soldier while the latter is a professor. For the soldier, time and mortality is a pressing question—not as much so with the professor. In meeting Brunet, a recruiter for the military, Mathieu is confronted existentially. Brunet tells Mathieu that he must renounce his freedom. The argument is that though Mathieu has renounced everything in order to gain his freedom, he still must renounce the one thing he is searching for in order to gain it. Passing through mostly dialogue, Mathieu comes to realize that Brunet, by being a soldier in WWII, has achieved what Mathieu has been attempting for thirty-five years. The pages of dialogue begins with Brunet speaking to Mathieu:

“You have gone your own way. You are the son of a bourgeois, you couldn't come to us straight away, you had to free yourself first. And now it's done, you are free. But what's the use of that same freedom, if not to join us? You have spent thirty-five years cleaning yourself up, and the result is nil [...] you're adrift, you're an abstraction, a man who is not there [...] You have renounced everything in order to be free. Take one step further, renounce your own freedom: and everything shall be rendered unto you.” (*The Age of Reason* 152-53)

Mathieu, now resigned to live his whole life “between parenthesis,” is at a loss. Brunet continues berating Mathieu. “Tomorrow you will be too old, you will have acquired your little habits, you will be the slave of you own freedom. And perhaps, too, the world will be too old” (*The Age of Reason* 154). It is a particularly low moment for Mathieu, as he concedes to being a “wash-out,” somewhat of an irresponsible human being during wartime, one who walks through the Luxembourg gardens while “men are firing point-blank at one another in the suburbs of Madrid.” In an internal monologue, Mathieu examines Brunet’s point:

Brunet was right, his life was a destiny. His age, his class, his time—he had deliberately assumed them all, he had chosen the blackjack that would strike him in the temple, the German shell that would shatter him to pieces. He had joined up, he had renounced his freedom, he was nothing but a soldier. And everything had been rendered unto him, even his freedom. He is freer than I. (*The Age of Reason* 155)

Dunbar, an American soldier nonetheless, is in the same position as Brunet. Dunbar has renounced everything that makes him unique. He belongs to the U.S. government. He is property. His destiny is set by those higher up in rank and class i.e. Colonel Cathcart. Yet, he does have a purpose. Dunbar’s fate is certain so long as he remains in Pianosa. He must continue to fly missions, he must continue to bomb unsuspecting villages for no particular reason, he must continue to sync his watch with the others at the briefings. As Lupack writes, “Heller reserves his unqualified condemnation not for war itself but for

the absurd and meaningless patterns of behavior that spring from American military-economic involvement.” (Lupack 23).

Dunbar is stuck in this mess, but could it be a good thing? He is not deceiving himself like Mathieu, who does not realize how little freedom he actually has in his pathetic life with his lover. Sartre would say, “Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is” (*The Rebel* 11). Dunbar knows that at any moment Cathcart can call him up to fly through anti-aircraft fire simply to get their name in the newspapers back home. Existentially it is better to side with Dunbar. When one renounces all freedom, there is less in the way of what it means to be human, to simply exist. You must “pledge your heart to the grave and suffering land.”² The closer that you can get to this, the better chances you have at taking control again—this time in a real sense, a sense that Sartre would be proud of—and defining your life. Mathieu, like some contemporary thinkers of Sartre’s time, has trouble believing that a human nature exists because he never takes up rebellious action (*The Rebel* 16). After all, “Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving?” (*The Rebel* 16). What Orr, and later Yossarian, realize is that mankind is united in their mortality, in their being victims of life. As Sartre explains in *The Rebel*, the slave acts “when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men... have a natural community” (*The Rebel* 16).

This abandoning of freedom is a step closer to gaining existential freedom—the kind that Mathieu is looking for. In *The Age of Reason*, Mathieu is plagued by debts that he owes to others. He feels burdened, chained to responsibilities in his personal and

² Höderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*. Sartre uses this quote before the introduction of *The Rebel*.

professional life. Faced with an insurmountable problem, in *The Age of Reason* is it finding money for an abortion, in life it is mortality, Mathieu must strive for the truth behind Virgil's quote from the *Aeneid* at the start of this essay. It is only when you realize that there is no hope that you can truly begin to fight. Mathieu cannot do this because as a civilian he still has hope. Dunbar and Brunet, as soldiers, are in constant danger; therefore they have accepted the fact that they have no hope for survival. Dunbar fights the absurdism in *Catch-22*, but he does it ineffectively: through words, not actions. Mathieu is paralyzed in thought at the end of *The Age of Reason*, even as his friend Daniel tells him about a friend who wanted to join the Spanish army. He never joined "and then he become deflated. He is down and out now," Daniel says (*The Age of Reason* 395).

Trials, Testimonials and Interrogations

Trials, testimonies and interrogations trap the characters of Clevinger and the chaplain in bureaucratic and legal absurdities. The bureaucracy that humans have put into place to create a more structured world actually creates more chaos in practice. The trials are slow and inefficient. In *The Trial* it takes years to bring someone to justice. Often it seems as if a character is doomed to a guilty sentence before the case even begins. These trial scenes are but another example of the futility of the human condition. This feeling of impending doom is actually a response to the realization that life is meaningless, that death is imminent. Our demise, much like Nately's whore, is lurking in the shadows each and every day. That is partially why Yossarian risks getting stabbed at the end of the novel in order to get away to Sweden. This reaction is in stark contrast to Meursault's emotional state during his trial. Meursault is uninterested, basically indifferent; Yossarian

is electrified and very much alive. Scenes involving trials can be found in *Catch-22*, Camus' *The Stranger*, and Kafka's *The Trial*. Heller uses his trial scenes as a template for depicting the absurdities of war.

Death comes to characters in many different ways over the course of *Catch-22*. Here I will focus on the deaths that occur not by the way of bullets or bombs, but by way of law, logic and legislation. Heller reiterates the Existentialist point that a death of the soul is just as bad, if not worse than a bodily death. Kafka, in *The Trial*, will enforce this point most succinctly, but a trial exists in Camus' *The Stranger* as well. In both style and narrative Heller brings to life the philosophy grounded in these past works. Admittedly, many of Yossarian's friends die in tragic mishaps miles up in the sky: Natelly and Snowden come to mind. However, Doc Daneeka and Chaplain Tappman are paralyzed by the bureaucracy involved in war, making them effectively the living dead.

Consider first the manner in which the Chaplain Tappman is put to trial in *Catch-22*. At the start of the scene the chaplain is asked to follow a colonel and a major whom he does not know in order to answer some questions. Chaplain Tappman, asking why he must come along for questioning, gets vague answers in response. "We're from the government. We want to ask you some questions," says an unnamed major. "That's a very serious crime you've committed, Father" (379). When the chaplain, who is not a Father because he is not Catholic, asks "What crime?" he is met with another ominous response, this time from the colonel. "We don't know yet. But we're going to find out. And we sure know it's very serious," the colonel says (380). The major follows with, "You've got nothing to be afraid of if you're not guilty. What are you so afraid of? You are not guilty, are you?" (380). They take him to a cellar in order to interrogate him. No

matter how the chaplain responds, the logic is always twisted into evidence against himself. It turns out that the chaplain is suspected of signing fake names in letters sent to family members of the soldiers. While both Major Major Major Major and Yossarian do this in the novel, the chaplain is the one who is interrogated for it. This scene comes on the eve of a deadly mission in which twelve men were killed. Still, the C.I.D. investigators would rather harass the chaplain than write up the report on the crash that morning.

The C.I.D. men have the chaplain cornered and accuse him of stealing a plum tomato from Colonel Cathcart, opposing orders that are absolutely ridiculous, and not believing in God. They keep the chaplain tongue tied by asking questions like, “Why would we be questioning you if you weren’t guilty?” (384). Chaplain Tappman swears that he is telling the truth, only to be met with “I don’t see how that matters one way or the other” (385). After a barrage of verbal attacks against the chaplain, the C.I.D. men finally declare him guilty “of the commission of crimes and infractions we don’t even know about yet” (386). After all, “If they’re his crimes and infractions, he must have committed them” (386). But the absurd logic does not end there. The C.I.D. men ask the chaplain to leave without hearing his punishment. The colonel says, “You’re damned right we’re going to punish you. But we’re certainly not going to let you hang around while we decide how and when to do it.” (386).

The chaplain’s interactions with the C.I.D. men are all too familiar for those well-versed in Kafka. *The Trial*, which focuses on the court case of K., a man accused of literally nothing, bears much in common with Heller’s trials in *Catch-22*. The main character of K. is apprehended in much the same way as the chaplain of *Catch-22*. “You

can't leave, you're being held," says one of the three men who confront K. in his own room one morning. "Proceedings are under way and you'll learn everything in due course" (*The Trial* 5). They ominously tell K. that he "will come to realize how true that all is" (*The Trial* 5). K., like the chaplain, resists his captivity, using sound logic to argue on his own behalf. The guards, once again, won't have any of it. "Good heavens! You just can't accept your situation," says Franz, the leader of the guards who are now in K.'s bedroom (*The Trial* 8). A tall guard continues, "After all, our department, as far as I know, and I know only the lowest level, doesn't seek out guilt among the general population, but, as the Law states, is attracted to guilt and has to send us guards out. That's the Law. What mistake could there be?" (*The Trial* 9). In a parallel to the scene in Heller's novel, the guards bring K. to another location. Here he meets the inspector, who has some advice for K. "These gentlemen and I are merely marginal figures in your affair, and in fact know almost nothing about it...I can't report that you've been accused of anything, or more accurately, I don't know if you have...And don't make such a fuss about how innocent you feel; it disturbs the otherwise not unfavorable impression you make," he says (*The Trial* 14). Whereas that scene is the set up for Kafka's entire book, Heller uses his "rendition" of that scene for just a fraction of what is a long line of absurd events. These "trials" are a great example of the ideal form of absurd bureaucracy. Throughout Kafka's novel, K.'s trial becomes a metaphor for life. That is to say, life is an unfair trial in which everyone is determined guilty (read: mortal) and most of our life is spent coming to terms with it (realizing how "true it all is"). Now, Heller doesn't use his trial with that end result, but the implications are there if he had chosen to run with them. Instead Heller uses these trials as the philosophical deaths of his characters.

The laws, oaths, regulations and orders serve to anesthetize the characters of *Catch-22* until they lose all that it means to be human. Doc Daneeka can't return home because he was registered in the flight log of a plane that crashed, though he never boarded the plane. Legally he is dead; he was on a plane piloted by McWatt that was part of a horrible crash. Sergeant Knight, who is standing next to Doc Daneeka as McWatt's plane crashes into the side of a mountain, follows his orders and declares Daneeka dead. Treated as a dead man, Daneeka slowly comes to a resignation. Upon hearing of his death (and the benefits she will be getting as a widow) Doc Daneeka's wife leaves him. Daneeka moves into the woods and becomes a recluse. His "Alarm changed to resignation, and more and more Doc Daneeka acquired the look of an ailing rodent. The sacks under his eyes turned hollow and black, and he padded through the shadows fruitlessly like a ubiquitous spook" (344). During one instance at the medical tent he once worked in, Doc Daneeka is turned away. In another victory for bureaucracy, "Then, only then, did he realize that, to all intents and purposes, he really was dead" (344).

In Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) we return to the issue of guilt and innocence during a pivotal scene in the courtroom. Meursault is on trial for the murder of the Arab, a murder that he did commit. Despite the fact that Meursault is guilty, his trial runs along the same set of cues as Kafka and Heller. Consider Meursault's interaction with the jury. Meursault says, "I was sitting across from a row of seats on a streetcar and all these anonymous passengers were looking over the new arrival to see if they could find something funny about him" (*The Stranger* 83). Meursault sees the press at a table just below the jury box. He explains his feelings of estrangement, stating, "Everyone was waving and exchanging greetings and talking, as if they were in a club where people are

glad to find themselves among others from the same world. That is how I explained to myself the strange impression I had of being odd man out, a kind of intruder” (*The Stranger* 84). The stifling hot courtroom is loaded with spectators and the judge begins to question the funeral director. The judge gets some juicy answers from him, answers that related to how Meursault treated his mother. This fact, and the fact that the prosecutor is looking “gleeful” and “triumphant” after the funeral director’s questioning, upsets Meursault and leads him to the following sentiment: “For the first time in years I had this stupid urge to cry, because I could feel how much all these people hated me” (*The Stranger* 90). The questioning of the caretaker leads to perhaps the most useful statement for my analysis of this scene. “It was then that I felt a stirring go through the room and for the first time I realized that I was guilty,” he says, bringing up the notion of guilty until proven innocent, a notion that is evident in *The Trial* and *Catch-22*. Lastly, in the most Absurd moment of Meursault’s trial, his lawyer says: “Here we have a perfect reflection of this entire trial: everything is true and nothing is true” (*The Stranger* 91). Now, this is true on a number of different levels. For example, it works on a narrative level, that Meursault’s trial is full of faulty facts and weak testimonials. Yet, on an existential level, “everything is true and nothing is true” can work as well. In this Absurd life we have to believe that things are true in order to survive, to function every day, though we do not examine their truths. Not that it matters. We can trace fact and folly in any old statement by an acquaintance, judge, lawyer, or criminal. Camus put it “as if familiar paths traced in summer skies could lead as easily to prison as to the sleep of the innocent” (*The Stranger* 97). That is to say, the institutions that we have built are basically societal constructions with no inherent meaning or agency. We can break them

if need be. Also, we can just as easily use them for good as we can use them for evil, or in this case we can misuse them in our flawed understanding of laws, morals and facts.

Chaotic Cosmos and Lunatic Logic

This is the final step in my breakdown of existentialist and absurdist fiction. We have ignored up until this point the form in which our examined authors chose to write their fiction. Sartre, Camus and Beckett use a variety of different forms to express their ideas: epistolary novel, theatre, essays, and fiction to name a few. What differentiates *Catch-22* from the rest of these existentialist works is that Heller's novel is Absurd down to the very way in which it was written. Stephen W. Potts, in his study of *Catch-22*, addresses the baffling structure of the novel. In his book titled *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, Potts sets to prove that there is a "method in the madness" of Heller's work. While this lack of structure was initially criticized upon the release of *Catch-22*, Potts makes it clear that "it is consistent with the chaotic cosmos and the lunatic logic of the story" (Potts 19). The chronology of *Catch-22* proves incredibly difficult to organize as Heller often repeats fractions of scenes and hops tangentially in time to seemingly unrelated events. Heller avoids the traditional narrative arc in which one event follows another closely related event. Waves of rising and falling action spread through the pages of *Catch-22* as there is no single event on which the novel hinges. Potts digs through years of literary analysis of the structure of *Catch-22* in which critics used textual analysis to create the "timeline" of the novel. As expected, every critic has gotten something wrong, even Heller for that matter, as evidenced by Frederick Kiley's and Walter McDonald's "A 'Catch-22' Casebook" (Potts 27) This collection of essays and charts that Heller made while creating his novel is useful because it proves that Heller

was acutely aware of the senselessness in *Catch-22*. As Potts explains, “‘Catch-22 is not simply chaotic, but meticulously written to appear chaotic, as Heller has insisted in a number of interviews. It is in fact a painstakingly constructed book” (Potts 27). The questions we must answer now are “Why?” and “to what effect” does Heller write *Catch-22* in a deliberately abstract fashion. Heller does have a plan for his novel after all, though it may seem like he has, as one *New Yorker* reviewer wrote, “shouted [it] onto a paper” (Potts 19). There is absurdist, even existentialist, significance behind Heller’s lack of structure in *Catch-22*. In writing this way Heller mimics the senselessness of war, the meaninglessness of life. His writing, the tool that he uses to express his ideas, is in cahoots with the very ideas that he is trying to express.

Perhaps Heller’s favorite technique in creating an absurd novel is his use of what Potts calls “*déjà vu*” (Potts 28). Not only does Chaplain Tappman directly bring this topic up around the middle of *Catch-22*, Potts argues that the reader experiences this sense of *déjà vu* as well. “Characters and scenes recur, and each time they do the narrative adds more information,” he writes (Potts 28). Heller likes to introduce the reader to something, take it away for one hundred pages, and then bring it back again. The best examples of this are with the soldier in white, the scenes in the hospital, and in Snowden’s death. Each time Heller provides more information to the reader; each time the scene gains more meaning. The tragic death of Snowden is replayed for us numerous times, the first time being a cursory glance at the dire situation, the last time in graphic detail. Heller’s writing functions in much the same way that the human mind works. After all, we do not always remember whole events in chronological order. Our memories often consist of splashes of things past, lifelong repetitions of the same scarring events.

As we move on from the meaning behind the macro structure of *Catch-22*, we can focus on some of the little things that Heller does to up the absurdity levels in his novel. The first seventy pages or so are prime hunting ground for these scenes. Reminiscent of the Marx Brothers, Abbot and Costello, even *Waiting for Godot* for that matter, Heller's exchanges between characters are full of misunderstanding, repetition, cacophony, and echolalic dialogue. A side-by-side comparison of *Godot*, *Catch-22* and the famous Abbot and Costello sketch *Who's On First*, copyrighted in 1944, is a good place to start this analysis of Heller's use of repetition to take meaning away from words, to deconstruct the rules of language, to make all conversation a monologue that simply reverberates in a dark vacuum.

First we will take an example from Heller's *Catch-22*

"Read me back that last line."

"Read me back that last line," read back the corporal, who could take shorthand.

"Not *my* last line, stupid!" the colonel shouted. "Somebody else's"

"Read me back that last line," read back the corporal.

"That's *my* last line again!" shrieked the colonel, turning purple with anger.

"Oh, no, sir," corrected the corporal. "That's *my* last line. I read it to you just a moment ago. Don't you remember, sir? It was only a moment ago."

(79)

Now, *Who's on First*

Costello: You know the fellows' names?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Well, then who's playing first?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: I mean the fellow's name on first base.

Abbott: Who

Costello: The fellow playin' first base

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first base.

Abbott: Who is on first.

Costello: Well, what are you askin' me for?

Abbott: I'm not asking you—I'm telling you. Who is on first.

Costello: I'm asking you—who's on first?

Abbott: That's the man's name.

Costello: That's who's name?

Abbott: Yes.

Lastly, an excerpt from Act I of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Estragon: He should be here.

Vladimir: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

Estragon: And if he doesn't come?

Vladimir: We'll come back tomorrow.

Estragon: And then the day after tomorrow.

Vladimir: Possibly.

Estragon: And so on.

Vladimir: The point is—

Estragon: Until he comes.

Vladimir: You're merciless.

Estragon: We came here yesterday.

Vladimir: Ah no, there you're mistaken.

Estragon: What did we do yesterday?

Vladimir: What did we do yesterday?

Estragon: Yes.

Vladimir: Why... [*Angrily*] Nothing is certain when you're about.

Estragon: In my opinion we were here. (*Waiting for Godot* 31-33)

Heller's cacophony of sound creates a discontinuity of language. All Heller's literary techniques—the repetitions, the confusion between conversing characters, paradoxes, contradictions, oxymoron, deflations—contribute to this overall chaos of the novel, this sense of the meaninglessness of language. It is a "severing of word and meaning, signifier and signified" (Potts 41). The excessive repetition of a phrase destroys the meaning behind the words. Language appears nonsensical, nothing but useless metaphor. This nonsense is an endearing aspect of Heller's prose, although some reviewers found it over-the-top and dry.

Slowly, these comedic scenes lose their luster and become something else entirely. Particularly in scenes during which a soldier is speaking with the higher-ups do we get

this macabre sense of impending doom. Clevinger's trial, for instance, comes to mind. His three interrogators have already decided that he is guilty. It is then that Clevinger discovers that "nowhere in the world, not in all the fascist tanks or planes or submarines... were there men who hated him more" (81). What begins as a sort of comedic outlet turns into a sober reminder of the inescapability of death, the "trapped" feeling of an absurd hero. "They show, for all their comic effect, how authority can set the parameters of discourse, so that words are sundered from their meanings, and language from reason" (Potts 46). Examples like these prove that Heller had intentions behind his syllogistic back-and-forth between characters.

CHAPTER TWO: ORR'S TRIUMPH

We have thus far established that *Catch-22* contains layer upon layer of existential themes: the passing of time; absurd trials; life as a soldier; even the novel's structure and prose style create a certain sense of meaninglessness that conjures up existentialism. These veins of existentialism that invigorate *Catch 22* can also be found in existential literature written by the movement's most prominent authors and during the movement's most prolific years. The question now is "To what effect does this change our understanding of *Catch-22*?" For years critics have attempted to answer this question by examining the novel's protagonist, Captain John Yossarian. He has been studied as an anti-hero, a religious figure, a modern man, and everything in-between.³ With a few exceptions, the character of Orr, Yossarian's roommate and a bomber pilot in the 256th squadron, has rarely been an object of inquiry in literary criticism. Yet, this brown-haired "pygmy with pilot's wings" is the only character that clearly triumphs over the absurdities present within the world of *Catch-22*. If we understand Orr as a central character he becomes a model for triumph.

I would like to examine two important scenes involving Orr: the second being his violent encounter with a prostitute, the first being his brilliant escape to Sweden. They may seem conventional at first glance; another absurd series of events in a book filled with many more, but their prescience is evident in their return during the epiphanic final six pages of the book. Given that Heller so meticulously planned out *Catch-22*, the

³ See: Brewer, Joseph E. "The Anti-Hero in Contemporary Literature"; Galloway, David D. "Clown and Saint: The Hero in Current American Fiction"; Solomon, Eric. "From Christ in Flanders to *Catch-22*: An Approach to War Fiction."; Wain, John. "A New Novel About Old Troubles."

prominence of Orr in the last pages of the novel should not go unnoticed (Potts 22). Though we have thought Orr dead for quite a while after his crash into the Mediterranean, Heller has merely been hiding him for the finale.

Most critical attention has focused on what Orr's survival means to the chaplain, Yossarian and Danby. We are missing, however, the significance of Orr's act in itself.⁴ "The chaplain ranks this resurrection from the dead a miracle and proclaims his renewed belief in God. For Yossarian the realization that Orr had long planned this journey to peace and freedom restores faith in human potential and brings hope back by suggesting that there is an alternative to becoming just another Snowden or Mudd, another dying boy" (Potts 109). It is this "alternative" that I would like to examine, for I feel that this triumph over the Absurd is distinctly American, that were *Catch-22* written by a French existentialist or an Irish absurdist, this ending would not only never have been considered, it might never have been imagined. Orr takes the rules he is given and makes a game out of them. He laughs in the face of the Absurd, meticulously planning his escape before the book has even begun. "With the news of Orr's intricately thought-out desertion, Orr becomes a holy fool, a hero for those...vying with an oppressive alliance of forces beyond their control" (Potts 110). Orr's leap of faith is the catalyst for our three final characters—Yossarian, Danby, Chaplain Tappman—to make leaps of their own. It is Orr's act of defiance, a defiance of the bureaucracy, of the military industrial complex, of everything that Colonel Cathcart and his lackeys stand for, that so inspires Yossarian to take action. "Let the bastards thrive, for all I care, since I can't do a thing to stop them but embarrass them by running away. I've got responsibilities of my own now, Danby. I've got to get to Sweden" (452). Orr did not tell Yossarian anything, his mouth was

⁴ See: Pinsker, Sanford. "Reassessing 'Catch-22'"

always stuffed full; no, Orr showed Yossarian what was possible if only one could gather the courage to act. Orr's escape to Sweden is Yossarian's silent call to arms, a hidden truth for those still conscious enough to see it. The chaplain, who views Orr's escape as a real miracle, proclaims, "If Orr could row to Sweden, then I can *triumph* over Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn, if I only persevere" (451). The chaplain has a newfound faith. He vows to beat up Captain Black and Corporal Whitcomb. He even threatens Danby, a character who often sides on with tradition, performing an awkward shadowboxing routine aimed at him. " 'I'm going to punch Captain Black right in the nose the next time I see him,' gloried the chaplain, throwing two left jabs in the air and then a clumsy haymaker. 'Just like that'" (452). In a flurry of existential action over the last six pages of a 453 page tome, Danby gives Yossarian a handful of cash so that he can attempt to escape to Sweden, the chaplain decides to finally stand up to the group of colonels and generals who abuse him, and Yossarian, thanks to a heads up by Danby, nearly escapes the knife of Nately's whore.

A Crazy Little Freak

Heller first introduces us to Orr as Yossarian's handyman roommate. The two reside in the most luxurious tent in the squadron. "Each time that Yossarian returned from one of his holidays in the hospital or on rest leaves in Rome, he was surprised by some new comfort Orr had installed in his absence—running water, wood-burning fireplace, cement floor" (17). Orr and Yossarian are paired off from the very start of *Catch-22*. Yossarian is broad-shouldered and brawny and Orr is uncannily resourceful. Heller describes Orr as he works on a gasoline faucet to feed the stove in the tent:

He worked without pause, taking the faucet apart, spreading all the tiny pieces out carefully, counting and then studying each one interminably as though he had never seen anything remotely similar before, and then reassembling the whole small apparatus, over and over and over and over again, with no loss of patience or interest, no sign of fatigue, no indication of ever concluding. (22-23)

If there ever were a man who was perfectly made for combatting the absurd, it was Orr. Most importantly, he understands that it is impossible to fight the absurd world in which he lives; the only option is to leave. Dunbar tries to fight the Absurd by manipulating time, but he is “disappeared” after a mental breakdown in the hospital. The old man from the whorehouse in Rome tries to outwit the absurdities of the war, but he is killed during a raid on his brothel. Each did not realize the impossibility of their tasks and could not survive in the world of *Catch-22*. As Davis explains, “our ability to manipulate discourse does not lessen our vulnerability to *Catch-22* and mortality. Like Yossarian and his friend, Orr, one can only ‘flee’” (Davis 75).

All other characters flee out of fear or necessity. In some cases, such as that of Doc Dankeena, they are forced out by the system of *Catch-22*, by the absurdities of war. It is only Orr, and afterwards Yossarian, who realize that “there is no alternative but ‘flight, a renunciation of that condition, that society, that set of circumstances’” (Davis 75). Heller’s intentions aside, it is quite fitting that Orr is an airplane pilot, a profession that requires mechanical “flight” no matter their metaphorical or philosophical implications.

Orr avoids the dangers associated with Yossarian's rebellion and the futility of the chaplain's arguments with Colonel Cathcart. As Victor J Milne writes, "Orr is the personification of the qualities of intelligence and endurance which make possible the survival of humanity under the worst conditions of oppression and exploitation." Amidst the madness of the novel, "Orr quietly practices the skills that will ensure his survival."⁵ He teaches himself how to fish for cod, how to paddle the life raft, and how to navigate using only a compass, a map and the stars. Orr is Daniel Boone, the Mediterranean his very own Cumberland Gap. Orr doesn't go west; he goes to neutral Sweden. As a soldier, though, Orr is anything but perfect. He has an abysmal record as a pilot (18 crashes), putting in danger his life and the lives of others. Yossarian would say, however, that their lives are already in danger, so it is interesting to point out that none of Orr's crew are ever injured during his crashes. These practice flights, therefore, are actually safer than the war itself, a fact that even Yossarian cannot accept until the final pages of *Catch-22*.

Sergeant Knight details Orr's preparedness when he relays to Yossarian what happened during a recent crash landing into the sea. Orr finds a box of chocolate bars and passes them around to the soldiers on the life raft. Then he finds bouillon cubes and cups to make soup. To drink Orr finds some tea and makes everyone a cup. "Happy as a lark," Orr takes some fishing line and dried bait, creating a makeshift fishing rod (309). Yossarian realizes in the closing pages of the novel that he too must flee. "Yossarian tells Danby to 'bring me apples, and chestnuts too' (459); it is not too late to heed the message Orr had been trying to teach him all along through his parables" (Lupack 59).

⁵ Milne, Victor J. "Heller's 'Bologniad': A Theological Perspective on *Catch-22*"

We can picture Orr as a toothless soothsayer, dripping at the mouth with juices from the apples stuffed in his cheeks much like the two women from Stephen's "Parable of the Plums" in *Ulysses*. Orr is as ripe as the fruit he constantly eats. Yossarian says it himself upon viewing Snowden's guts spilled out on the floor, "Man is garbage...Ripeness was all." We are haunted by this image throughout *Catch-22*, but Orr provides the foil. The epicurean Orr embodies the succulence of life, the cup that overflows. Warm red blood pulsing through his veins, he is the antithesis to the dying boy.

Even his name, "Orr," evokes an otherness that suggests he is the exception to the rule, the man who sees and does things differently than everyone else. He is the in-between. Orr defies the Us vs. Them logic of the book, the "Whose side are you on?" sentiment promoted by Colonel Cathcart and the rest of the military industrial complex. Orr, like his symbolic counterpart "Or" does not cling to logic. It is in his own private irrationality that Orr defies his peculiar disposition. Nobody cares about Orr as an individual, yet he is one of the few characters who maintain their individuality throughout *Catch-22*. Orr's primary tool of escape, an *oar* that he uses to paddle his lifeboat through the Straits of Gibraltar all the way to Sweden, is a pun on his name as well.

Orr's fascination with chestnuts—he enjoys stuffing his cheeks full with them—echoes Sartre (the roots of a chestnut tree in "Nausea" spark Roquentin's epiphany), who was particularly fond of the aforementioned legume.⁶ There is, after all, not a food ever the more closely linked to existentialism than that of the chestnut. In a particularly moving scene, a naked Yossarian watches Snowden's funeral while perched in the

⁶ In another interesting connection, Milo flies to Oran (237), the costal Algerian city that is the subject of Camus' essay *The Minotaur or The Stop in Oran* a part of *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.

branches of a chestnut tree. It is therefore my opinion that it is hardly an accident that Heller would feature chestnuts so prominently in *Catch-22*, particularly surrounding the existentially crucial character of Orr.

Couple this literary reference with the existential sentiment evoked in *Nausea* of the futility of language to describe an object. Now, recall that Orr doesn't speak much in *Catch-22* and we have come across something significant. Perhaps Orr has found what Davis would call "a discourse consistent with human freedom and responsibility" (Davis 68). Orr does not rely on language, he is either laughing or has stuffed his mouth full of the fruit of life. This is the "continuous discourse" that Heller and many of his contemporaries were searching for in the leap from modernism to post-modernism (Davis 68). Heller suggests in his writing style that patterns of language are like General Peckham's bomb patterns: "It means nothing, but you'd be surprised how rapidly it's caught on"(325). Literary Existentialism, think of Sartre again here, dramatizes the intermingling of discourse and matter within human experience. Matter and discourse, as explained by Davis, "are doubled, even reversible functions within a world whose 'illusory depth' always has been indistinguishable from whatever we have grated the privileged status of 'reality'" (Davis 75). A typical existential protagonist is full of words, but is crippled by inaction. We can see that trend in many of the aforementioned existential texts. Orr, on the other hand, is nearly mute, a giggling, drooling, man-child, but he takes the leap of faith and flies to Sweden. In a genre so full of words, Orr has none to give. He has only the fruit of life dripping from his chin.

Orr's fight with the prostitute is a terrific starting point for some insight into Orr's absurd logic. This scene mystifies Yossarian all throughout *Catch-22*. On several

occasions Yossarian asks Orr for an explanation. However, Orr can never get the words out of his mouth. He either has too many crab apples stuffed in his cheeks, starts laughing, or evades the subject by turning questions back onto Yossarian. Within the scene as well, Orr offers up no explanation as to why the whore is hitting him in the temple with her shoe. There are no words to say, though, in this ultimately unsuccessful attempt to triumph over the Absurd. Orr has paid the whore to beat him senseless, nothing more needs to be said.

Set in a brothel in Rome, Nately's whore's kid sister is furiously pounding Orr over the head with the back of her high-heeled shoe. Both naked and standing in a doorway to one of the many bedrooms, a crowd gathers to see what all the commotion is about.

The girl shrieked and Orr giggled. Each time she landed with the heel of her shoe, Orr giggled louder, infuriating her still further so that she flew up still higher into the air for another shot at his noodle...She shrieked and Orr giggled right up to the time she shrieked and knocked him out cold with a good solid crack on the temple that made him stop giggling and sent him off to the hospital...(24-25)

Nobody who saw this surreal scene could explain what happened, not the old man who runs the brothel, not the old woman who cares for the girls, nor could any of the soldiers that were present for the beating. The bulge-eyed, buck toothed Orr keeps this secret until the Yossarian puts the pieces together in the final scene of the book. "Now I understand what he was trying to tell me. I even understand why that girl was hitting him on the head with her shoe...he was paying her to, that's why! But she wouldn't hit him hard enough,

so he had to row to Sweden” (450). Orr, by paying a prostitute to hit him over the head with a shoe until he falls to the ground unconscious, nearly succeeded in conquering the absurd. If only he had a stronger prostitute he would not have had to come up with what would be his final plan, his final triumph.

The soldiers of the 256th squadron are well aware that neutral countries exist during the war. “Sergeant Knight knew all about Majorca, and so did Orr, because Yossarian had told them often of such sanctuaries as Spain, Switzerland and Sweden where American fliers could be interned for the duration of the war under conditions of utmost ease and luxury merely by flying there” (309). The idea of escaping to neutral territory passes through the mind of many of the characters in *Catch-22*. However, it is only Orr who acts on such a ludicrous whim, and like Heller, Orr plans things out far in advance. “He knew what he was doing every step of the way!...He even practiced getting shot down. He rehearsed for it on every mission he flew,” Yossarian says (449). Orr’s escape was extremely dangerous and could not be replicated by anyone other than himself. However, the details of the plan are worth an examination.

In almost cartoonish fashion, Orr practices crash landing B-25 bombers into the Mediterranean. On his final “practice run” before he attempts his escape, Orr lands his damaged plane in water “with such flawless skill that not one member of the six-man crew suffered the slightest bruise” (307). Sergeant Knight, one of the crewmembers, recounts Orr’s actions as the men boarded the life rafts. “He just kept slapping his hands on his legs every few seconds as though he had the shakes and saying ‘All right now, all right,’ and giggling like a crazy little freak...It was like watching some kind of moron” (308). True to his name, Orr finds a tiny blue oar “about the size of a Dixie-cup spoon”

and begins rowing the life raft with it (309). After this mission, Yossarian confronts Orr back in their tent. Noting that Orr has been shot down on almost every one of his eighteen missions thus far, Yossarian says, “You’re either ditching or crash-landing every time you go up” (311). It is here the Orr gives up his biggest hint of escape. He directly asks Yossarian to begin flying with him on missions. Yossarian, like most logical people, does not see why anyone would want to fly with such a bad pilot, one who constantly gets shot down or ditches missions. In fact, Yossarian feels sorry for Orr. He fears that Orr needs protecting in this brutal world in which they live. Heller gives us Yossarian’s inner monologue in his final meeting with Orr, a monologue which in hindsight seems completely unwarranted and downright cruel towards Orr, who we now know is the most capable character in the book.

Orr was so small and ugly. Who would protect him if he lived? Who would protect a warmhearted, simpleminded gnome like Orr from rowdies and cliques and from expert athletes like Appleby...?...They would take his money, screw his wife and show no kindness to his children...Orr was an eccentric midget, a freakish, likable dwarf with a smutty mind and a thousand valuable skills that would keep him in a low income group all his life. (312)

Orr, who is fixing a valve for a heating unit in the tent, asks one last time if Yossarian would like to join him in flight. Yossarian, annoyed with Orr’s constant tinkering, his methodic repetitions of mindless tasks, dismisses him as just another dying boy. But Orr is not like every other soldier in the 256th. Orr is so much a personage that it is hard to imagine anyone even remotely like him. Is Heller trying to say here that a triumph over

the absurd, though possible in literature, is not possible in real life? After all, Orr is a caricature of a person; he is in no way a model soldier. Yet, he leaves Yossarian with this:

“Yes, sir— if you had any brains, you know what you’d do? You’d go right to Plitchard and Wren and tell them you want to fly all your missions with me.”

Yossarian leaned forward and peered closely into Orr’s inscrutable mask of contradictory emotions. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Tee-hee-hee-hee,” Orr responded. “I’m trying to tell you why that big girl with the shoe was hitting me on the head that day. But you just won’t let me.” (316)

Bring Me Apples, Danby!

Dismissed and forgotten by both literary critics and fictional characters within *Catch-22*, Orr’s eventual triumph over the novel’s absurdities is a gargantuan feat of perseverance. Whereas most characters suffered through the limitations of the life of a soldier, Orr rewrote the rulebook—or perhaps more accurately he tore it up. Potts writes, “It takes, therefore, a wholly rational irrationality, a courageous cowardice, the heroism of a fool, to reverse the very real hopelessness of Yossarian and his fellow survivors” (Potts 109). Orr restores Yossarian’s faith, inspiring him to take a risk and make a run for Sweden. Sure, there will be risks involved, but Yossarian faces those same risks anyway. He could be caught and killed if he runs away to Sweden; he could be caught and killed on the battlefield too. The end result does not matter because, as we have learned from

the existentialists, death will always find us. What counts is, and Yossarian notes this, that you continue to try. The fictions between which Yossarian must choose, the current war in Italy or his utopia in Sweden, are not endpoints. The free will to choose—inspired by Orr—gives Yossarian the power not to fight for the knockout blow, but merely to fight for the sake of fighting. It is the choice for choice itself (Potts 114). Yossarian’s free will is a “free will bound only by a respect for life—his own life and the other’s lives—freedom from the inverted logic and inverted values of the life-destroying fiction defined by *Catch-22*” (Potts 114). When Yossarian sees Snowden’s guts spilled out on the floor, he realizes that if man is robbed of this free will, he is nothing but rotting garbage. The hope that Orr brings to Yossarian and the chaplain in the final pages of the book will not give them the upper hand in the fight against absurdism, in the battle against worldly chaos. It will only give them the chance to fight back. “The chaplain regains his faith in God, Yossarian his faith in humanity” (Potts 113). Orr’s triumph is the act in itself—it goes unnoticed for precisely this reason, yet it provides the explosion of faith that fuels the ending of *Catch-22*.

Heller has created with *Catch-22* a new American twist on literary existentialism. The resounding hope at the end of *Catch-22* can be starkly contrasted with the endings of related existential literature. I would attribute this to four American cultural traits that can be reflected in its literature. Firstly, America has a notion of the singular American Rebel. These men embody the pioneer spirit and make a habit of getting into trouble. James Dean and Clint Eastwood come to mind as prominent American Rebels of cinema. Secondly, after WWII America assumed the role of world superpower. *Catch-22* was written during this period, and thus Heller would have, consciously or not, placed a bit of

this gusto in his work. Thirdly, ever since its founding days there has existed a sense of American Exceptionalism in the people of the United States. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote what would become the best account of the phenomenon of American Exceptionalism in his *Democracy in America*, noting that America is indeed so exceptional that it is impossible to compare it to all other democratic nations. Lastly, the overriding optimism in American culture is reflected in the arts that stems from the Manifest Destiny spirit that allowed for so many to pack up and make lives for themselves out west.

The most approachable representation of this American Existential touch is in the character of Milo and his capitalist syndicate called M&M Enterprises. Heller takes the laissez-faire economics that America was mastering in the post-war years and uses them for absurdity. “Indeed, Milo stands at the end of a long American tradition of such literary con men” (Potts 75). From Melville’s *The Confidence Man* to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Milo is one of many swindlers, hustlers, and gamblers on a long list in American Literature. I find it significant that Heller would link something so prized to Americans as Capitalism with something so European as Existentialism. Aside from the optimistic ending of *Catch-22*, this is the best evidence that Heller produced a uniquely American style of literary existentialism.

Despite Milo’s humble beginning as a mess officer, he comes to power through shady deals with even shadier people all over the world. Initially purchasing food for his mess hall, Milo expands to weapons and minerals by the end of the novel. Heller inserts a hilariously rhyming sentence into a conversation between Colonel Cathcart and Milo on the topic of Milo’s lack of bombing missions (he mostly flies planes to run his business.)

“The cork?”

“That must go to New York, the shoes for Toulouse, the ham for Siam, the nails from Wales, and the tangerines for New Orleans.”

“Milo”

“We have coals in Newcastle, sir”

Colonel Cathcart threw up his hands.... “It’s no use. You’re just like I am—indispensible!”.... The whole system would fall apart if anything happened to you. (373)

Not only is this exchange absurd in a stylistic sense, it is also absurd in a narrative sense. Heller has made a mockery of Milo’s beloved syndicate by suggesting that he buys and trades supplies simply on the basis of whether or not they rhyme with the original or destined name of the city. Potts paraphrases part of a Leon F. Seltzer essay entitled “Milo’s ‘Culpable Innocence,’” in speaking about Milo’s morality. Potts writes, “Milo so fully represents the ‘moral insanity’ of this world, the inability to recognize the difference between moral behavior and immoral behavior that is permitted, indeed, even encouraged, by the capitalist apotheosis of private profit” (Potts 76).

Consider Milo’s slogan for his syndicate: “What is good for M&M Enterprises is good for the country.” Is this not a mere paraphrasing of Charles E. Wilson’s advertisement for General Motors? (Potts 78). It is significant that Heller chose to mimic GM in his depiction of Milo’s syndicate. There is perhaps no company more American than General Motors, so to mock it with such profound absurdity as Heller does is to add a distinctly American touch to an idea that originates on the Continent.

Milo defends his business contracts more than he defends his country. So many people are counting on M&M Enterprises—enemies, allies, mayors, soldiers—that Milo must stay in business so that everyone else can stay happy. What is odd about Milo is that he does have a high sense of morality, unlike Cathcart and Korn (Potts 76). He chastises Orr and Yossarian as they chase around whores in Italy, though he is happy to set them up contractually with a whorehouse. Milo is just a hypocritical businessman, who, along with many others, built the American economy. Now, Heller could not have known what the 1960s would do to America, but he had this amazing foresight to take a system that was already present during WWII and bring it to its wits end. It seems to me, then, that Heller is saying that the groundwork for Cold War insanity had already been set by the close of WWII.

The bleakness of Franz Kafka's work is a good point of comparison in suggesting that Heller's American style is inherently more optimistic than the European existential model from which it derived. The line "Like a dog!" comes to mind from the end of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. The denouement involves the slaughter of the main character K. who has been waiting for the edge of a blade after realizing that his court trial was ultimately hopeless. Yossarian, on the other hand, is warned about this blade by Danby, and narrowly escapes it (453). Both texts are absurdist, existentialist, comment on the downfalls to bureaucracy, and contain ridiculous trial scenes. Yet, they radically diverge in tone and content at ending of each novel. What explains that Kafka kills his protagonist "Like a dog" while allowing for Heller to give his protagonist a timely heads-up? I suspect that the difference is cultural, but further inquiry should be made into the subject. As was explained in Chapter One, both *The Trial* and *Catch-22* have a lot in

common, but their endings reflect a cultural difference that in my view partially originates from the four distinct American traits and how they materialize in the work of American authors.

Consider, as Pinsker does in “Reassessing ‘Catch-22,’” the American flair in the novel. We have an underdog in Yossarian, someone who we can cheer on and identify with much in the way that Twain, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville “pit Self against Society, the pure-of-heart against the thoroughly corrupt” (Pinsker 605). Yossarian also blames Milo and the other greedy, power-hungry higher-ups for his dismal situation, putting Yossarian “squarely in the American grain” (Pinsker 605). Stripped from all contexts, *Catch-22* is a novel about a rebellion, an American and a hopeless place. As Pinsker rightly points out, Heller “belongs to this great American tradition of dissent” (Pinsker 605). What’s more is that Heller takes this tradition a step further by ridding us of the overly romantic war novel like *A Farewell to Arms*, and replacing it with a story in which the protagonist knows “the existential fact about battle: the enemy wants to kill you” (Pinsker 605). Frederic Henry does not understand what war is before he takes his job as an ambulance driver in the Italian Army during WWI. Yossarian, on the other hand, knows exactly what war entails, and he plans to stay the hell away from it.

Perhaps Heller as an American writer had to spin his novel toward what some critics would consider a borderline positive ending to a book that touches upon some pretty bleak themes. Is it distinctly American to have a happy ending? Was Heller playing off of the American sense of individualism, the sense that if you work hard in America you can make a life for yourself, when he gave Yossarian the power to take off for Sweden at the end of *Catch-22*? Heller, like many post-war American writers, was

invested in ideas from Europe that he then transplanted into native soil. Still, something happened in that voyage across the Atlantic. It is not that the ideas changed; it is that something was added to them upon the shores of Roanoke Island, upon crashing the bow into Plymouth rock. What once was as bleak as the ink of Camus' pen was suddenly imbued with the light of American Exceptionalism. Orr's *Catch-22* is glistening with optimism in comparison to the crippling inaction that overtakes the ending of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Meursault feels "less alone" at the end of Camus' *The Stranger*, but he is still being lead to his death, surrounded by a crowd of howling spectators. Flashing knives plunge through the final page of *The Trial*. Tomorrow it will rain in Roquentin's Bouville. Paris, "the City of Light" is home to Camus and Sartre, but the Brooklyn native Heller resides in the "Shining City Upon A Hill."

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