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“WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE”

LOGIC IN CATCH-22

IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *Catch-22* two of the good-hearted but weak-headed characters complain of the “vile logic” and the “immoral logic” used by their opponents.¹ To many readers a “wild logic” or even an “absurdist logic” will also appear to be used by many of the other characters. Yet all these uses and misuses of logic centre on the distinction between form and substance.

Consider this early exchange, in which two United States Air Force officers on active duty in World War II are speaking:

“They’re trying to kill me,” Yossarian told him calmly.

“No one’s trying to kill you,” Clevinger cried.

“Then why are they shooting at me?” Yossarian asked.

“They’re shooting at *everyone*,” Clevinger answered. “They’re trying to kill *everyone*.”

“And what difference does that make?” (p. 17)

Clevinger is reduced to apoplexy, and all because he chose the wrong form to express the substance of his thought. When Yossarian says, “They’re trying to kill me,” he means, of course, “They’re trying to kill me *personally*.” Clevinger understands this, and his reply, “No one’s trying to kill you,” actually implies the thought “you *personally*.” By way of evidence Yossarian offers the fact, “They’re shooting at me,” and again means *personally*. At this point Clevinger makes his mistake. He means to say, “They’re shooting at *everyone impersonally*,” a form of words that would have implied the substantive thought that those shooting regard the mass only and not the individual. But Clevinger uses a form of expression that actually stresses individuality: “They’re shooting at *everyone*. They’re trying to kill *everyone*.”

Yossarian rightly pounces on the wrong form, for, since he is *one* of the *everyone*, "What difference does it make?"

Clevinger has in effect confirmed Yossarian's argument, for the wrong form Clevinger chose to express the substance of his thought has ironically exposed the true substance of the situation. There is in fact no difference to the dead man whether he has been shot at as an individual or as a member of a mass, and there is likewise no difference to the people who are shooting: they are still trying to kill. Heller has thus, in a very fast exchange, used the distinction between form and substance to expose the irrationality of a very common belief, that there really is a difference between trying to kill a member of an army and trying to kill an individual.

In a later exchange one of the participants is tricked into using the wrong form. Yossarian says that he wants to quit fighting: "Let somebody else get killed." Major Major replies, "But suppose everybody on our side felt that way." And Yossarian counters: "Then I'd certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way. Wouldn't I?" (p. 107)

It is clear from the context that Yossarian means by his first remark that he has already exposed himself enough to the danger of death for his country. The substance of what he has to say would then be, "Let somebody else expose himself," but he chooses to exaggerate the form to what he actually says, "Let somebody else get killed." The appropriate answer for Major Major to make is: "Suppose so many other people on our side felt that way that we lost the war." But he is tempted by Yossarian's exaggeration into using exaggeration of his own and so he actually says: "But suppose everybody on our side felt that way." Inherent in the form he has chosen is the implied belief that whatever the large majority of people believe must be right, and it is this inherent implication which Yossarian picks up when he counters, looking to the *everybody* which the Major unwisely used, "Then I'd be a damned fool to feel any other way." The Major is hoisted into a different argument altogether and is lost. And the reader is made to question, if he has not already done so, whether the number of people holding to a belief really has anything to do with its rightness or wrongness.

In a still later exchange Yossarian has the tables turned on him. He has been pleading insanity to Doc Daneeka in the hope that the flight surgeon will ground him. Yossarian says (p. 314): "They're not going to send a crazy man out to be killed, are they?" The Doc replies, "Who else will go?"

It is clear from the context that Yossarian did not think his commanders cared at all which particular individual was killed on any mission. Conse-

quently what he probably had in mind was the presumed desire, on his commanders' part, to avoid losses in planes and men in general, and so his thought could probably have been phrased thus: "They're not going to send a crazy man out to endanger the return of our other men, are they?" But Doc Daneeka picks up the wrong form Yossarian used and replies, in effect, "Who else, other than a crazy man, will go out to be killed?" His reply of course reminds us of why there are usually men available to fight wars and even to fly particularly dangerous missions: because each man feels that, regardless of what might happen to his buddies, he himself will return. And how rational is that particular feeling?

A pathetic variation on this choice of the wrong form to express a particular substance occurs in an exchange between the chaplain, A. T. Tappman, and Colonel Korn (pp. 396-397). Tappman says,

"Colonel Korn, I want to talk to you about the crash this morning. It was a terrible thing to happen, terrible! . . . Some of those twelve men had already finished their seventy missions."

Colonel Korn laughed. "Would it be any less terrible if they had all been new men?" he inquired caustically.

Tappman then complains (to himself) of Colonel Korn's "immoral logic," but actually Tappman was trapped in his own word terrible, since for him there can be no *more terrible* or *less terrible*. If he had said how *unjust* it was to send men who had already done their duty, he would have had a case, but he chose the wrong form and so was reduced to frustration.

Another kind of frustration appears in the inversion Heller provides to this whole process of choosing the wrong form to express the substance. In a scene of mingled comedy and pathos (pp. 190-191), Heller has Yossarian impersonate the dying son of an Italian-American couple who come to visit him with their other son. The real dying son is called Giuseppe, but Yossarian for a while insists on being called Yossarian, and the brother agrees that Yossarian is the correct name. The brother then says,

"Ma, make him feel good. Say something to cheer him up."

"Giuseppe."

"It's not Giuseppe, Ma. It's Yossarian."

"What difference does it make?" the mother answered in the same mourning tone, without looking up. "He's dying."

She is right of course. When the substance is the same—the boy is dying—what difference does the form of his name make? Any form will do.

These have been instances of choosing the "wrong" form to express a

certain substance. There is at least one instance in which two characters talk about a substance by referring to forms detached from it and not necessarily related to it. When the number of missions Yossarian has to fly is raised to fifty-five, he goes to see his influential friend, ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen.

"What would they do to me," he asked in confidential tones, "if I refused to fly them?"

"We'd probably shoot you," ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen replied.

"*We?*" Yossarian cried in surprise. "What do you mean, *we?* Since when are you on their side?"

"If you're going to be shot, whose side do you expect me to be on?" (p. 60)

If Yossarian had regarded Wintergreen's response, "We'd probably shoot you," as an accurate expression of the substance of his thought, he would of course have exclaimed, "*Shoot me?*" Instead he says, "*We?*", which indicates that what he had really meant by his first question was, "Will you help me?" Wintergreen understood him perfectly well and gave him his answer in the juxtaposition of *we* and *you*. Yossarian's next question means, in effect, "Why aren't you my friend?", but since he phrased it, "Since when are you on their side?", Wintergreen is able to fasten on the *side* and briefly but vividly present an image of the two sides of a firing squad, thereby giving Yossarian his answer: "I'm not your friend if it is going to hurt me."

In this exchange both form and substance have been used, with the substance being got at indirectly through largely unrelated form. There are many instances, however, in which the substance is ignored and the form is looked to alone. One such instance occurs when Yossarian decides to see everything twice. This does *not* mean that he saw two of everything in front of him. The doctor held up one finger and asked him:

"How many fingers do you see?"

"Two," said Yossarian.

"How many fingers do you see now?" asked the doctor, holding up two.

"Two," said Yossarian.

"And how many now?" asked the doctor, holding up none.

"Two," said Yossarian.

The doctor's face wreathed with a smile. "By jove, he's right," he declared jubilantly. "He *does* see everything twice." (p. 186)

When the soldier Yossarian was imitating in this seeing of everything twice died during the night, Yossarian decided quickly, "I see everything once!"

"How many fingers do you see?" asked the [doctor], holding up one.

"One."

The doctor held up two fingers. "How many fingers do you see now?"

"One."

The doctor held up ten fingers. "And how many now?"

"One."

The doctor turned to the other doctors with amazement. "He does see everything once!" he exclaimed. "We made him all better." (p. 187) The doctors, of course, are not deceived. As one explains, "We're all in this business of illusion together. I'm always willing to lend a helping hand to a fellow conspirator along the road to survival if he's willing to do the same for me" (p. 188).

But a kind of deception does take place in some other instances. When the replacement pilot Mudd was hurried into action before he could formally report in at the base camp, and then inconsiderately got himself blown to bits on his first flight, he left behind him a serious problem for Sergeant Towser. Mudd had left some very substantial gear in Yossarian's tent, but Towser could not give a formal order to remove it until he had a formal entry showing that Mudd had in fact joined the squadron and had been assigned to Yossarian's tent. He had no such entry and, with Mudd dead, he never would have. So Mudd's gear had to stay in Yossarian's tent because it wasn't there in the first place, and Sergeant Towser was satisfied to live in a kind of self-deception, looking to the form and ignoring the substance. Much the same happens to Doc Daneeka. When the plane on which he is listed as a passenger crashes, he is considered dead, even though it is well known that he was not in the plane and that in fact he is still very much around (p. 350). The Doc suffers moderately from the deception, for he is shunned like a ghost and receives no rations, but his wife in the States suffers more. She is notified of his death and has returned to her a letter which she sent to him and which has been stamped "Killed in Action," although, one may surmise, the person who wielded the stamp probably saw the Doc outside his window.

By now it has no doubt become clear that Heller uses his device of faulty logic for a number of different purposes. He amuses us, he forces us to look at ideas in a new light, and he begins to expose some of the irrationality that is at the centre of many of the things that happen to us, by our own doing or through others. As with many other devices, such as the pseudonym of Washington Irving and the role of Milo Minderbinder, Heller introduces his faulty logic in a spirit of light-hearted fun and continues to play with it for some time. But gradually, and irregularly, as the book proceeds, the device

takes on darker overtones, and is used to reveal more and more lamentable aspects of the human situation. Logic is misused naively, ignorantly, stupidly; it is also deliberately perverted.

This perversion is carried further by a satanic figure in the book who uses the form of his argument to deceive his interlocutor as to the substance. The nameless old satyr who presides over the officers' "apartment" building in Rome asks Lieutenant Nately:

"What is a country? A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for." (p. 253)

By saying that not *all* of sixty countries can be worth dying for, the satyr fastens Nately's attention on the form—the number involved, and implies a conclusion that likewise concentrates on the form: "Therefore *none* of them is worth dying for." Even in form this argument is faulty, of course, constituting a *non sequitur*, for even if not *all* of sixty countries were worth dying for, any number from zero to fifty-nine could be. But Nately is so naive that he does not see the error, and he is so bedazzled by the argument about the form that he entirely overlooks the substance, that some of the countries, those affording a superior way of life and yet attacked by aggressors, can indeed be worth dying for. More subtle is another of the satyr's arguments:

"The frog is almost five hundred million years old. Could you really say with much certainty that America, with all its strength and prosperity, with its fighting man that is second to none, and with its standard of living that is the highest in the world, will last as long as . . . the frog?" (p. 249)

Nately's only reply is a desire to smash the satyr's leering face. Again he has had his attention so concentrated on the form of the argument—the longevity of the frog's existence, that he has not noticed the discrepancy in substance—the difference in the quality of life led by the frog and by the human inhabitants of America. More open in its juxtaposition of form and substance, but more confusing in its result, is a third exchange. Nately says, "It's better to die on one's feet than live on one's knees" (p. 254). The satyr replies: "I'm afraid you have it backward. It is better to *live* on one's feet than die on one's knees. *That* is the way the saying goes." The substance of what Nately said in the first place can be expressed thus: "It is better to die in freedom than to live in slavery." The satyr's reply can then be phrased: "It is better to live in freedom than to die in slavery." Actually this statement is only a complementary extension of Nately's, not a contradiction at all. But the satyr, by asserting

that it is a contradiction and by reversing the form—the order of *live* and *die*, bamboozles Nately into thinking it is.

Perversion is carried still further when form is regarded as a satisfactory equivalent to substance. The concept is presented visually in the tight bomb pattern insisted on by Colonel Cathcart. Usually it made no difference militarily if the bombs fell close together, and on at least one occasion it worked against the purpose of the mission, but Colonel Cathcart insisted that they fall close together, because then the photographs of them would look good (pp. 334, 337). The most ludicrous example of accepting form in place of substance occurs when the psychiatrist interviews Yossarian. Because Yossarian has a morbid aversion to dying, especially in battle, because he hates bigots, bullies, snobs, and hypocrites, because he is antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived, and because he is depressed by such things as misery, ignorance, persecution, and corruption, he is officially and formally insane (p. 312). The formula decrees that whoever holds those attitudes is thereby insane, regardless of what substantiation for the attitudes there may be in the person's society.

The acceptance of form for substance becomes nightmarish in the basement interrogation to which the chaplain is submitted. He is shown a letter on which someone else has written, "I long for you tragically. A. T. Tappman, Chaplain, U. S. Army." The colonel interrogating him says:

"The author signed his name."

"That's my name there."

"Then you wrote it. Q.E.D."

"But I didn't write it. That isn't my handwriting, either."

"Then you signed your name in somebody else's handwriting again," the colonel retorted with a shrug. "That's all that means." (p. 391) The charge of misdoing, based on form, is accepted as if the form were substance, and all other factors are twisted to support that charge. Even the chaplain becomes confused. His interrogator says, "We accuse you also of the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet. Guilty or innocent?" (p. 395). Actually of course these "crimes" exist in form only, in the interrogator's sentence, but since he regards them as substance, the chaplain replies, "I don't know, sir. How can I say if you don't tell me what they are?" The chaplain too has accepted them as substance: "tell me what they are," instead of "tell me what you think such things might be if they exist at all."

"How can we tell you if we don't know?"

"Guilty," decided the colonel.

"Sure, he's guilty," agreed the major. "If they're his crimes and infractions, he must have committed them."

Even grammar, that most capricious of forms, is used to support the charge.

The depths of irrationality are reached when to this acceptance of form in the place of substance is added the acceptance of the wrong form. The interrogator insists that professing to be an Anabaptist is a suspicious thing, for the interrogator, having studied Latin, knows that the word *Anabaptist* simply means that the person is not a Baptist (p. 392). The interrogator sees the prefix *ana* as being composed of the Latin *an*, meaning "not," and the English *a* (which shows how much he knows about languages), whereas actually, of course, the prefix is one word, the Latin *ana*, meaning "again" and reflecting the Anabaptist belief that one needs to be baptised again. But when unreason is allowed to rule, it will stop at nothing: when homicide is of no importance, what matters a little verbicide?

Wild and whirling is the logic of *Catch-22*, but as it whirls it reveals deeper and deeper irrationality, and as it whirls it spins on the axis of form and substance.

NOTE

1. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962 [1st ed., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961]), pp. 250, 397. All references are to the Dell edition; later references will appear in the text.