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AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE:

From Political Fiction to Faction to Fact

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> *And it led as well to that prolonged sequence of events in which Athens suffered defeat; the empire was destroyed; the democracy was outlawed and restored; Socrates and Asclepius were tried, found guilty, and executed; Plato wrote his philosophies and started his school; Aristotle came to Athens as a student and departed as fugitive and was later, during a different war, painted by Rembrandt in Amsterdam contemplating a bust of Homer that was a copy, and, as a consequence of this, as a conclusion to centuries of hazardous travels, and as a matter of verifiable fact, made in 1961 his triumphant passage from the Parke-Bernet Galleries on Madison Avenue and Seventy-seventh Street in the city now called New York to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second Street before John F. Kennedy was shot between the Korean War and the Vietnam war and was succeeded as president by Lyndon B. Johnson, who, counseled by an inner circle of educated dumbbells associated mainly with Harvard and other prestigious universities, lied to the American people and the American Congress and secretly and deceitfully took the nation openly into a war in Southeast Asia it could not win and did not, persevering obstinately on that destructive course as resolutely as did Pericles when he moved Athens ahead onto her self-destructive course of war with Sparta.*
>
> Joseph Heller, *Picture This*

In 1961 a first novel by an unknown writer won the National Book Award, edging another first novel by a then unknown writer. But while few today remember the winner, Walker Percy's *Moviegoer*, the runner-up looms bigger than ever before. With tens of millions copies sold worldwide, with translations from Finnish to Chinese, *Catch-22* boasts entries in English-

language dictionaries from *Webster's* to the *OED*. A modern classic and a staple of college curricula, it is also—despite its pacifist tenor—a required reading at the US Air Force Academy (which in 1986 even sponsored an academic symposium to mark the quarter-centenniary of its publication).

This last accolade is less odd when you consider that, for the 1970 blockbuster film adaptation, Hollywood assembled not only a cast led by Alan Arkin, Orson Welles, Martin Sheen, Martin Balsam, John Voight, and Bob Newhart, but a bomber fleet ranked twelfth largest in the world. Much of this enduring success owes to Heller's reader-friendly aesthetics: acerbic humour, immaculate if complex plotting, a pleiade of oddball characters, and an almost counter-cultural iconoclasm. But, at the end of the day, the even weightier reasons have do with history than with aesthetics.

Ostensibly set during the Second World War, *Catch-22* came to mean so much to the decade it ushered in because it so uncannily presaged the mindset of the war-scarred 1960s. Little wonder that, while their government waged war to make peace, pacified Vietnamese villages and villagers in order to save them, debased language into a public relations spin-cycle, and turned democracy into a *comedie bouffon*, Americans turned en masse to the master of black comedy.

A decade and a half later, reviewing Heller's novel *Something Happened* for the *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt ventured that it would be to the '70s what *Catch-22* was to the '60s: a book of truths ostensibly rooted in the past, farsighted about the future. Were he writing toward the end of the 1980s, he might have said the same about *Picture This*, a historical tour de farce written after eight years of Ronald Reagan, which reads as if it was written after eight years of Bush the Younger.

Masterpiece satire and experimental aesthetics aside, this prophetic intimation of the future past is a compelling reason to revisit this extraordinary novel from the writer who passed away in 1999, shortly after completing his farewell *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*. With the prophetic resonance of a latter day Nostradamus, though without the latter's equivocations, Heller

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breezes through two-and-a-half millennia of history, politics, economics and art to deliver his most searching sermon, and his darkest satire. Reviewing some of the lesser-known episodes of Western history, time and time again he fast-forwards to his Reagan-era present which uncannily resembles our Bush II-era past.

Naturally, the cynic in him has few illusions about the efficacy of literature against ignorance, apathy, or worst of all, television. 'If there was never another novel written,' shrugged the author in a 1971 interview with the *LA Times*, 'the world would still go on. It wouldn't change anything, no one would care. But if there was no more television, everyone would go crazy in two days' (Powers, 1993: 137).[1] Heller's cynicism is even more corrosive in *Picture This*. 'You will learn nothing from history that can be applied'—he scoffs on the second-last page of this novel-as-history, or history-as-a-novel—'so don't kid yourself into thinking you can' (Heller, 1989: 340).[2]

Yet the artist in him belies the cynic. Having confided to the *US News and World Report* that he was no good at all at nonfiction, now he self-reflexively yokes his genius for the surreal to the investigation of sober fact. Having confided elsewhere that the easiest part of writing for him was the dialogue, now he crafts a novel with scarcely any dialogue at all. Having traded ink for acid, he takes the artistic risk of his career by composing a *summa historiae* that stands out from his entire oeuvre like an Arab in the Knesset.

In the autumn of his career, like the elder, vitriolic Mark Twain, Heller takes on a subject of epic proportions: the American empire. On a narrative canvas equally ambitious in size, he clothes Periclean Athens and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic in rich historical robes and compares their rise and fall with the state of the American union. He is, of course, too canny a historian and satirist to close his eyes to the differences among the three superpowers. But the stirring consonance of his juxtapositions suggests that the differences may only be superficial, while the analogies profound.

1. For background on Heller, see Seed; Swirski.
2. All subsequent references are to *Picture This* unless indicated otherwise.

If his thesis is right—if the dissimilar historical superstructures are driven by the same political-military engine—*Picture This* goes a long way to explaining why Americans of any generation find themselves at war with countries many could not even place on the map. But is Heller really a prophet? Or is it just that we don't care to learn from history? In the year *Picture This* came out, the author favoured the latter alternative: 'No one can change history, but it keeps on repeating' (Haynes 1993: 19).

Indeed, the pity and pathos that permeate the book arise largely from Heller's focus on the historical invariants in human affairs, particularly when it comes to war, politics and money. Barring military technology and the means of economic production, precious little, after all, has changed from the Golden Ages of the Greek and Dutch republics.

'I went back to ancient Greece because I was interested in writing about American life and Western civilization,' recalled Heller in an interview with Bill Moyers. 'In ancient Greece I found striking—and grim—parallels' (Moyers, 1983: 279). Shuttling back and forth between the internecine war on the Peloponnesus and the colonial heyday of the Dutch East India Company, *Picture This* lives up to its author's confession of being 'a book about money and war' (Reed, 1986: 68). Albeit a gross simplification, the above quote does identify the twin concerns that impose on this scattershot novel an almost classical unity of theme.

Donning the chiton of Cassandra under the burgomeester's surplice, Heller tops them both with a fool's cap and proceeds to dissect three different bodies politic that have succumbed to the same imperial hubris. That is why, behind his sometimes puckish, sometimes scathing, ad libs aimed at the Greek imperial democracy and the Dutch corporate regime, always lurk the decades that, for better or worse, belonged to Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan. Stitching these disparate epochs is the painting depicting of one of the world's greatest philosophers, executed by one of the world's greatest painters, purchased in 1961 by one of the greatest American museums for the greatest sum then ever spent on a work of visual art.

The result is a narrative structure perfected already in *Catch-22*: time-warps replete with cyclically amplified flashbacks and flash-

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forwards to a handful of central episodes—the book's structural and thematic leitmotifs. One of these is the life and death of Socrates, the philosophical gadfly on the Hellenic body politic. Another is the destructive and, as the author is at pains to document, self-destructive war between Athens and Sparta. Finally, there is the genesis in 1653 of the painting *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* by Rembrandt van Rijn, and its subsequent vagaries on the international art scene.

Even without Heller's ironic asides, it does not take a degree in history to recognize in the Greek and Dutch empires the archetypes of the Cold War, the Vietnam war, the conservative revolution under Reagan, and the neoconservative one under Bush II. Projected onto a multiplex historical canvas, the three empires become the catalysts for ruminations on the nature of democracy, war, law, art, money—and, not least, human nature.

The fact that in 1609 Henry Hudson seized a prime chunk of real estate on America's eastern seaboard in the name of the Netherlands only tickles Heller's sardonic bone. So does the fact that mercantile Holland was in its time as fearsome a commercial power as is the US today. And that, enshrined as the democratic leaders of the Western civilization, then and now, both Athens and America got there on the backs of domestic slavery and overseas militarism. *Picture This* takes no prisoners when satirizing the discrepancies between the accepted historical commonplace and the actual historical circumstance. The chronological time-warps and jump-cuts only underscore the fate of any republic that comes down with a case of manifest destiny.

So overriding, in fact, is this sense of history that some critics expressed reservations whether Heller's novel is a novel at all. Judith Ruderman complained, for example, that it 'seems more like a history text in which the pages have been scrambled than it does like a novel' (Ruderman, 1991: 10). In a syncretic novel like *Picture This* one can, of course, debate where fact ends and poetic licence begins. But there is no debating that what holds its thirty-seven chapters together is not a traditional hero or storyline, but political history.

Heller cribs from a staggering number of sources, from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Diogenes Leartius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Aristotle's *Poetics, Metaphysics, Ethics*, Plato's *Apology*, *Laws*, *Republic, Seventh Epistle, Symposium*– to Hesiod, Aristophanes, Aeschines, Homer and who knows who else. Furthermore, he lifts entire sections from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, particularly on the bloodbath on Corcyra, the deliberations before the massacre of the city of Melos, and the calamitous war against Syracuse.

His portrait of Rembrandt and the painter's times owes, in turn, at least as much to Gary Schwartz's *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*, Paul Zumthor's *Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland*, Simon Schama's *the Embarrassment of Riches*, and John Motley's more than a century old yet still unsurpassed treatise, *the Rise of the Dutch Republic*. In the face of this cornucopia, some critics threw up their hands in despair, sounding for all the world like Mordecai Richler who used to grouch that Richard Condon's books were not so much to be reviewed as counter-researched (Richler, 1964: 4).

True enough, *Picture This* flouts everything taught in creative writing courses. Piling facts upon facts upon trivia, it digresses– among myriad others–into thumbnail biographies of Alexander the Great, William of Orange, Philip II, and Spinoza; disquisitions on curing herring, the Dutch shipbuilding industry, and the invention of the telescope; Rembrandt's birthweight, schooling, and extra/marital life; and even such crumbs of art-history as the fact that the corpse in *the Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* was that of a man hanged for stealing a coat.

At first blush all this may seem to be just a slapdash inventory of historical ins and outs, no more than a narrative fodder for rhetorical flourishes and ironic editorializing. Heller's reflections on his craft offer, however, a good reason to believe that this free-associative exterior conceals a studiously orchestrated design. 'I tried to avoid… the conventional structure of the novel,' explained the author of *Catch-22*; 'I tried to give it a structure that would reflect and complement the content of the book itself, and the content of the book really derives from our present atmosphere, which is one of chaos, of disorganization' (Kressner,

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1973: 276–77). Seemingly unstructured and repetitive, the story was constructed with a meticulous concern to assume the form of a formless novel.

This is not to deny that Heller elevates redundancy—be it in the form of repetition, refrain, periphrasis, or amplification—to the status of a major structural tenet. In style, however, he opts for minimalist aesthetics, with staccato sentences frequently chiselled down to a single line, and paragraphs dramatically lineated to highlight—or give breathing room—to successive ideas. Look at all this one way, and you indeed see what Heller himself dubbed tongue-in-cheek as 'excessive excess' (Green, 1988: 57). Look again, and you see exquisite dramatic counterpoint, tragicomic fusion and ontological syncretism from a writer of sterling credentials: Ivy League MA in literature, Fulbright and Christensen scholarships at Oxford, and Distinguished Professorship of English at the City College of New York.

To be sure, *Picture This* is not a historical fiction in the manner of Alexandre Dumas *père*—but neither is it 'tedious and static' (Ruderman, 1991: 179). Far from a documentary transcription, Heller is never happier than when he can serve history with a twist, typically by resorting to ironic conceit, anachronistic paraphrase, or *reductio ad absurdum*.

His pages are peppered with one-liners that flow from historical incongruities, such as: 'One of the effects of capitalism is communism' (89). At the opposite end of the scale lie complex dramatic scenes that illustrate how, driven by strategic, political, and economic expediency, any imperial history looks like so much catch-22. The mood, too, ranges from solemn during the kangoroo trial of Socrates, to surreal, as when Rembrandt reflects on the payoffs of imitating paintings by his apprentices which, although imitations of his own, are deemed by the public to be more Rembrandt-like.

Even though Nabokov called such mingling of fiction and fact a mangling of both art and truth, Heller could not care less. His title is the best case in point, in a *double entendre* swivelling between Rembrandt's historical picture and our capacity to picture things that are not—the prerogative of fiction. Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle is, of course, real enough, but since no one

has any idea what historical Aristotle looked like, the artist had to invent his likeness, much as that of Homer of whom no one knows anything except his name. As for the sole figure in *Picture This* who approaches the status of a hero, although we have a historical source about Socrates in Plato himself, the latter met Socrates only briefly, only as a young man, and only when the sage was already past sixty. To conclude that Plato's picture might well be a composite of fact and fiction would be a truism.

The ontological distinction between fiction and nonfiction occludes the fact that both novelists and historians are writers who use all manner of stylistic, rhetorical and structural tropes to convert readers to their point of view. To muddy the waters even further, the historical roots of 'faction' hark back more than two thousand years before the new journalism of Tom Wolfe or the nonfiction novels of Truman Capote. One of its unapologetic practitioners was, in fact, none other than Heller's narrative model from the antiquity, Thucydides. Availing himself of what we would call today ethnographic fieldwork–including, notably, personal interviews–the Greek historian resorted to rhetorical and satirical flourishes to convey the full cruelty and senselessness of warfare between the Mediterranean superpowers.

Like the author of *Picture This*, alternating in tone between magisterial and personal, Thucydides also did not shrink from judging the merits of historical figures and events. Taking issue with a number of inherited clichés, he did not even spare the Trojan War which, he asserted, 'falls short of its fame and the prevailing traditions to which the poets have given authority' (Zagorin, 2005: 28).[3] Equally to the point, neither did he shy away from putting words in people's mouths, although strictly in accordance with their historical background and personality. 'My habit,' he wrote in self-defense, 'has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded by the occasion, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said' (30).

If Thucydides is a narrative historian of power politics who used dramatic attribution to make his themes–be it war, governance,

3. See also pages 24–26 for background to Thucydides and the Trojan War.

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or the state of the empire—more salient, so is Heller. The latter's Aristotle, for example, seems to have all the fun in the world using the Socratic method, as described to us by Plato himself, to poke holes in the latter's blueprint for a just government.

> 'In my virtuous communist republic, it will be the role of the individuals to do the bidding of the state.'
>
> 'And if people don't agree?'
>
> 'They will be oppressed, for the good of the state. The Guardians will make them.'
>
> 'Who will make the Guardians obey?' inquired Aristotle. 'Where is the stronger force to compel them?'
>
> 'What difference does it make?' said Plato, vexed. 'What people do in this world is of no consequence.'
>
> 'Then why are you bothering? Why are we talking? Why did you write your *Republic*?' (Heller, 1989: 281)

It is, naturally, ironic that the very democracies that permitted Thucydides and Heller to crucify them in writing, afforded them so much to crucify. In his classic study, *the City and Man*, Leo Strauss suggested, in fact, that even though Thucydides's philippics were tolerated by the authorities, it may have been a calculated move to take the heat away from their imperial ambitions. To his credit, Heller takes full account of this irony by turning the tables on himself. Writing history or writing about history entails making choices not just about causality and context, but relevance. Even the most conscientious chronicler must perforce select and collate his data, and at times make conjectures about them. Be that as it may, Heller-as-historiographer never wavers: much as we need history, we need truth more.

Had he lived to our millenium, he would be dismayed to learn how right he was. Having for decades imitated the White House which had always called the Vietnam 'police action,' only in 1999 did the French admit that their brutal eight-year war against Algerian independence *was* a war rather than an 'operation to maintain order.' The echoes of Orwell's MiniTru are, however, more sinister. In November 2005, to howls of derision from former colonies and historians at home, France's parliament voted to uphold a *law* that has traditionally ordained history textbooks

to drum up the benevolent side of its colonial rule. Eventually, the furore reached such a crescendo that the offensive statute was abrogated, but the moral is clear: new and better history is only a vote away.

The French are not alone, of course, in taking procrustean liberties with history. No need to invoke Stalin's USSR, Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, or Saddam's Iraq either. In *the Clash Within* Martha Nussbaum recounts how the current Hindu Right–the BJP and its allies–attempts to rewrite Indian history to elevate Hindus at the expense of Muslims. In Taiwan, for reasons linked to their struggle for acceptance as a sovereign democracy, the authorities are removing the name of Chang Kai Shek from streets and even the national airport. Chechens were freedom fighters before being rebranded as terrorists when the US needed Russian compliance in the Security Council. In 2007 protests erupted in Okinawa against Japanese orders to alter high-school history textbooks which teach that the WW2 Japanese army ordered Okinawans to kill themselves rather than surrender.

In *Poetics* Aristotle deemed poetry 'a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.'[4] *Picture This*–whose working title was at one point *Poetics*–is preceded by another of the philosopher's epigrams: 'Tragedy is an imitation of an action.' Instead of mimetically, however, Heller interprets Aristotle historically as a tragic cycle of political actions that bore no fruit in the past and, imitated, are doomed to sterility in the future present. The unity of his novel emerges from the blend of ironic–not to say olympian–detachment and intense compassion with which he surveys the ways in which individuals act in societies that, despite invocations of liberty and democracy, seldom afford opportunity to practice them.

4. Aristotle, *Poetics.* <http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/poetics9.html> (Accessed 10.10.2013).

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