

ASEBL JOURNAL

Good Books

Catch-22, by Joseph Heller

Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community, by Wendell Berry

What Ought I to Do? by Catherine Chalier

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New Books

Origins of English Literary Modernism, 1870-1914, Edited by

Gregory F. Tague

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Good Quote

"We colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in." Thomas Hardy (*Far From the Madding Crowd*)

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Word

Individuation

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"A Modest Attempt to Demonstrate a Somewhat Moderate Understanding of Yossarian and His Inclinations toward Death in *Catch-22*"

By Brad D. Baumgartner

"Everything is water."
- An early philosophical statement.
No, no. Strike that.

"One must Imagine Sisyphus happy."
- Albert Camus, from *The Myth of Sisyphus*

There, that's much better.
Now we can begin...

C a t c h - 2 2 holds the key to an existential door; a door that opens to either a dry cellar, or an old attic. I'm really not sure yet. Whatever the case,

this book's thematic central character Yossarian, is an entity in and of himself. Joseph Heller has assembled for his readers a character whose own death is the means to truly living. Suicide or Life? Or both? Could death truly be the key to living authentically? Through Yossarian's realization of the meaninglessness of his life, and his consciousness of the manifestation of the

absurd in the world of *Catch-22*, he achieves victory over his captors. I intend to explain how Yossarian's realization of his own death is the very thing that gives his *life* meaning.

Catch-22 is an *absurdist* novel. Seemingly, its characters are *absurd*. But why is Yossarian considered an absurd character? Yossarian lives in a random, chaotic, essentially meaningless universe, a uni-

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FRONT PAGE:

Brad Baumgartner, in an essay of literary criticism, examines the existential components of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* through the quizzically absurd

character Yossarian.

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[Rob King](#), through a powerful and honest reflective essay inspired by

poet Wendell Berry, explores the meaning of consumption in the Judeo-Christian tradition in our modern world.

verse in which humans are condemned to create meaning and significance. Yossarian is trapped in this godless, quagmire of a universe, and in turn is forced to make meaning out of chaos.

I must clarify something in the beginning of my essay to avoid contradictory and irrevocable statements I could make about Yossarian and his inclinations toward death. I am beginning under the existential assertion that human beings do not have a finished essence. What we are is pretty much up to what we do, and our nature remains undetermined until we “do stuff.” For example, you cannot act in a cowardly nature until act in the face of danger. Our essence results from the summary of our activities and experiences; or the notion that existence precedes essence. On that note, let us dig into Yossarian.

We, as readers, can understand this text using “phenomenological readings.” We can understand the text using the notions of phenomenology of *time*, and phenomenology of *being*. I wish to cover the latter in more detail. I feel that a basic understanding of the concept of phenomenology of being is needed to fully examine and understand Yossarian in the text.

In his book *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger argues that to fully understand human beings or *dasein* (the word he uses to describe human beings), one must look phenomenologically at *dasein*. Human beings, and more importantly Yossarian, exist, and what they are beforehand doesn't matter so much as what they make themselves. A chair, for instance, does not learn how to be a better chair; it is made to be what it is: a chair and nothing else. You see, the essence of the chair is something determined outside itself.

This notion is analogous to one of the defining characteristics of human beings: our “thrown-ness” into the world. Human beings are completely unlike chairs and other inanimate objects. Human beings are not what they are; they are what they will be. This notion of being “thrown” into a world also pertains to Yossarian as it is consistently demonstrated in the world of *Catch-22*. Using phenomenological readings, one can see that within the context of phenomenological time, Yossarian can “experience.” He experiences phenomenology of being, realizes he will die, and by making the decision to escape the chaotic world of *Catch-22*, ultimately dying, makes himself truly human in an existential sense.

Catch-22 tends to denounce essentialist arguments, just as existentialism does. The natures of human beings are not born – rather they are made. A way to examine the text is to start with an examination of the only character whose *being* is an issue for him: Yossarian. To be a human being, or more so to be Yossarian in the text, you must be confronted with other human beings or characters. Such is the case in *Catch-22*. All of the characters are always in some mood or other, amorously juxtaposed against each other. It is Yossarian's *anxiety* towards death that separates and distinguishes him from the others.

Anxiety, under an existential understanding of the word, means to fear everything and nothing. Yossarian's anxiety is embodied in words on paper, though this doesn't make his anxiety any less corporeal than ours. One of the defining characteristics of Yossarian is his anxiety about death. In Heideggerian terms, anxiety is the mood that discloses the finite nature of human beings.

Yossarian is constantly afraid that people are trying to kill him. In this time of war Yossarian's fears are justifiable, in that he cathects his fears of death onto the enemy soldiers. But he does not think that the enemy is trying to kill *all* of the American bombardiers, which could be construed as a central tenet of fear in a battalion, rather he thinks that the enemy is trying to kill

him in particular. This anxiety is so severe that it seems to shadow his entire being. Heller gives us insight as to the severity of Yossarian's anxiety in the text. Heller writes:

"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?"

"Who's they?" he wanted to know. "Who, specifically do you think is trying to murder you?"

"Every one of them," Yossarian told him. (25-26)

Time, in Yossarian's being towards death, is not a series of nows, but something that Yossarian is running out of. Yet, Yossarian is conscious of it all in the end. This consciousness of consciousness makes Yossarian an *authentic* character, as there can be an *authentic* dasein according to Heidegger's argument (Oaklander 153). Yossarian is not interchangeable with other characters, as we are not interchangeable with other human beings. No one can die *for* Yossarian but Yossarian himself, and he is cognizant of this reality. And if Yossarian is in fact "dying," then he realizes that there is only so much time left. Yossarian's anxiety about death is the exact realization that to be a human being is to be dying.

Throughout the text, Yossarian's paranoia and anxiety about death become more and more tangible. He realizes a monopoly exists around him that is incessantly churning out death and disaster. Every move he makes is trying to escape this inevitable end. A certain dichotomy surfaces: Could death, in turn, be that which ultimately fulfills his life? Is his life completed at the same time his life vanishes? Yes, I think it is.

Death individualizes us or isolates each one of us from all other individuals (Oaklander 154). Death is unique to Yossarian. Death is absolutely unique to us all; it is irreplaceable. Yossarian fits the Heideggerian mold of a true dasein. Heidegger states, "*No one can take the Other's dying away from him...* Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all" (Heidegger 182). For Yossarian, death (on his own accord, not the monopoly's), constitutes the totality of his life, and is the point wherein Yossarian reaches wholeness. Death is *the* distinctive feature of Yossarian's life, not just one event among many.

The attempt to avoid facing the inevitability of death takes on ingenious forms throughout the text. Examples of these forms include the constant "upping" of bombardier missions, the catch-22s, and the soldier who saw everything twice, who functions both literally and emblematically as reminiscence of "bodies." All of these examples in the text ultimately serve as attempts by others to escape their mortality and certain death.

Yossarian lives in a godless, savage world where there is no supreme "rule giver;" there is no moral imperative alive in the text to which Yossarian can turn. Rather a systematic oligarchy exists of which he cannot escape the grip. He is, in a sense, *condemned to be free*, according to a Sartrean understanding. Condemned because he did not create himself and cannot leave the situation he is in. He is doomed to a life of censure in the military during a time of inexplicable

war. Yossarian's ability to leave under non-absurd circumstances is non-existent.

In the world of *Catch-22*, the thought of "getting out alive" is something like a square-circle; it cannot logically be conceived of or carried out. That is unless/until he kills *himself*, which is the decision he makes when he chooses to escape on his own accord. He rages against death to keep his sanity. But more importantly, in the ultimate paradox, he rages against death to keep his life.

Humans, by nature are nihilators. They can say they don't want to do things. Creatures like squirrels, for example, do not choose; rather they are "squirreling it up." Squirrels cannot become ashamed, simply because they cannot do otherwise. Furthermore, cats are not ashamed of their excrement. A cat's instinct is to cover his excrement, while human beings become ashamed of their own feces. Why do the body and bodily serve as major issues for human beings and not for other animals? Heller's description of Yossarian answers this question; or perhaps, creates a powerful metaphor for it.

What happens when a human being cannot escape the predicament he is in, even when his own death is at stake? Yossarian is reduced to a squirrel in the chaotic environment of *Catch-22*. He cannot do otherwise, simply because he cannot. Alternative options do not exist for Yossarian, for he has been reduced to that of a rat in a maze or a caged horse in a burning barn. Yossarian remains fearful of others trying to kill him throughout the novel, and while others reside in the same godless universe as he, they are not conscious of their predicament. It is only by a certain existential twist of fate that Yossarian realizes he can escape the godlessness of his circumstances and ultimately live.

But to live is to die. Yossarian can only escape and *choose* to live through his own suicide. Nothing else can render his agency meaningful. Yossarian cannot control the outcome of any other circumstance in the world of *Catch-22*. The machine that churns out death is the exact thing that holds Yossarian's life in pure anguish. He cannot truly live until he makes the decision to die, act upon this decision, and ultimately kill the machine.

In another paradox, for one's actions to matter, their actions must take place in a finite space of time. How could this be in a novel consisting of no apparent teleology, covered by a mantle of phenomenological time? I contend that using phenomenological readings, one can construe that the absurd structure of phenomenological time in the novel is the exact notion that structures the text in such a way for Yossarian's final actions *to* matter.

This novel, at its physical core, is about "bodies." The novel reveals Snowden's secret, suggesting that human beings are merely matter; that we can bleed and eventually die in a system not so unlike *Catch-22*'s. Towards the end of the novel, in the chapter entitled "Snowden," Heller describes bodies in profane detail. Heller states:

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.
(450)

As I have stated, *Catch-22* is an example of "absurdist" literature. Absurdism is a diversion

of logic that unites the unexpected with the logically impossible. This notion is irrational, though frighteningly logical in terms of the hermeneutics of *Catch-22*. The absurd structure of the novel gives way to an infinite-finite realm. In a certain understanding, finitude means that one's actions actually matter; one does not get to do them over.

Thus, if it were possible to make infinite choices nothing counts. This idea negates the argument that Yossarian's decision to die doesn't mean anything in an authentic sense. I suppose I am making an argument that this novel depicts a world in which *finite* choices can be made in an infinite, chaotic world. Yossarian's choice to flee is a prime example of my argument.

So what conclusions are we, as readers, supposed to draw from Yossarian's existence and death in the absurd? What existential relevance, if any, are we to take from the absurd realm of *Catch-22* and Yossarian's death? According to Albert Camus, there is a happiness, a joy, and a repose in living with a consciousness of the absurd (Oaklander 341). The moment one gives up all illusions of finding meaning in the universe, one can truly live. In Yossarian's case, he gives up all the illusions and finds meaning in escape and death. Yossarian gave up the illusion of freedom and was liberated.

The only way Yossarian could give up the illusion of freedom was by dying. Due to his position as a bombardier, Yossarian could not do otherwise, simply because he could not. An absurd freedom is liberating but it is also absurd because it leaves us alone (Oaklander 342). It is, as Camus states, "the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live," (366). Yossarian realized the meaninglessness of his life, became conscious of the absurd, and achieved a measure of victory over the absurd. Yossarian's fate has ensured his happiness.

But what does Yossarian's escape and death mean for others? Yossarian becomes a true individual when he decides to leave the absurd world. He concludes that his *being* meant his presence in the absurd world. More so, his "absence" is emblematic of his "presence." The other characters understand Yossarian's presence when he decides to escape. Thus, he leaves them. We do not need to look far for an example of this notion. Take, for instance, "looking for a pen that isn't there." You look for the pen, realizing you touched the pen just moments ago but now you cannot find it. You begin to realize what negation is; you can feel the pen's absence, it's a substantial "nothing."

So, for Yossarian's actions to matter in the absurdity of *Catch-22*, thus showing the other characters that he was truly present in the first place, he must leave them. He gains a veritable power over the chaotic world. Yossarian and Orr are the only two characters in the novel to beat the machine that churns out death. Orr got out alive. On the other hand, Yossarian had to die. Through death, Yossarian gained an "absurd freedom" in a godless universe. Our hero is at once tragic and absurd. Yet his death has ensured his happiness. One must imagine Yossarian happy.

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Animals, Vegans, and the “New Religious Right”: The Enduring Influence
of Wendell Berry

By Rob J. King, B.A., M.Div., Th.M., Ph.D. (ABD*)

In the Judeo-Christian Tradition many laws regulate the use of animal products. From the Jewish Torah extensive kosher laws regulate how animals are to be slaughtered, how to avoid certain combinations of lawful foods (i.e. milk and meat products), which animals are permissible to eat, and how such “commands” inform a Biblical view of creation’s intrinsic goodness and worth. Later, however, with the advent of Christianity, and in an opening of the covenant to Gentile converts, the prohibitions of the kosher dietary laws are lifted in order that all of creation can be viewed as “good” and worthy of being eaten as Peter received his “vision” which lifted the designation of “clean” versus “unclean” animals!

But what are Christians to do in the twenty first century? Can the Christian (or Jew or concerned U.S. citizen) still maintain such an “openness” to consumption? Are certain animal products produced in such inhumane ways that a “New Kosher” dietary practice is warranted? Are animals simply viewed as raw matter and ground up for consumption so that any view of animals as actual creatures created by God has been lost in the Post-Industrial Western World? The prolific essayist and professor at the University of Kentucky, Wendell Berry outlines how far from a Judeo-Christian ethos our American farming industry has now drifted. What is unique about Berry’s work is not only his staunch Christian conservatism, something rarely coupled with environmentalist concerns, but also Berry’s linking of sexual exploitation, economic-class exploitation and a general degradation of humanity with our overall U.S. consumptive patterns of existence. In his *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, Berry makes startling moral conceptual connections between the degradation of the natural environment and the degradation of the human person. For Berry, and in an iconoclastic political vein, the false separation of “sex” from issues of respect, dignity and restraint is a mistake just as issues of economic justice viewed separately from intrinsic human worth are a false separation. In short, the manner in which human beings treat the physical body is linked directly and indirectly to how the environment is treated. Strip-mining of Kentucky farmland and “strip clubs” that celebrate pornographic views of the human physique are no different in moral content according to Wendell Berry.

In the “spirit” of Wendell Berry, one must ask the following questions. Does the woman or man who scans the local bar scene looking for a new, much younger sexual “conquest” not directly relate to the overall “consumption of flesh-at-all-costs” of unbridled meat-eating? This is not to outlaw all forms of meat-eating. Surely, animals that are *truly* raised in humane, sanitary, and natural conditions are allowable as food according to both the Old and the New Covenants. But just as the experienced bar-hopper looking to entice his or her next nineteen year old victim is “living-according-to-the-flesh” so also is the well-fed banker, prosperous on the interest paid him, now indulging in his or her next juicy steak at Outback or Ponderosa also living according to the flesh. But, as the Christian Tradition reminds us, if we live according to the flesh we will die ac-

ording to the flesh. Sexual promiscuity will lead to venereal disease and unregulated food habits will lead to heart disease, high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Enter the “vegan” movement and the New Evangelical and Catholic Political Right is either left in a moral quandary *or* like Wendell Berry, a more *Christian* U.S. Christendom may be in its formative stages! Some have labeled this new nascent liberal Evangelicalism by the phrase “crunchy conservative” to note the interesting interplay of “liberal,” almost hippy-era environmentalism with “conservative” U.S. Political concerns such as the Pro-Life Movement. Although some truth exists to such a broad characterization, if Wendell Berry is correct in his analysis, much more is at play. Truly, some “conservatives” will buy a pair of Birkenstock sandals, send \$10 to the United Way and then vote Republican. This would be the “thinnest” designation of someone as a “crunchy conservative,” and ironically enough what aptly describes many U.S. environmentalists!

But, in spite of such superficiality, the movement away from the *fiscal* right and towards a Pro-Life, environmentally-conscious “New Religious Right” could well be under way. Take the U.S. Presidential Election of 2008. Barack Obama is, in many ways, the most “liberal” of the major Democratic contenders, having opposed the unjust War in Iraq the most forcefully. Similarly, the “maverick” Republican, John McCain, a man who voted against various “torture” bills, such as the Military Commissions Act of 2006 that ruled out habeas corpus, is the most “liberal” of the major G.O.P. contenders of the Political Right. Thus, rather than a strictly “conservative” versus “liberal” election cycle occurring, instead the entire U.S. Political Spectrum has “shifted” noticeably to the Left. In many ways, as G.O.P. Governors Charlie Crist (Florida) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (California) demonstrate (each with strong environmental records!), what was once “an issue of the political left,” that is environmentalism, is now a *de facto* American cultural more. Moreover, whereas once environmentalists could be designated as extremists, now it is the environmentalist lobby that must be overcome for industry to move forward.

Having noted the shift in 2008 Presidential Politics, however, like the “crunchy conservative” who sips Starbuck’s coffee while also allowing for deforestation, the depth of a creation ethic simply will not be washed away. Thin partisan political support is easily dismissed by those actively engaged in practices of moral resistance. The “hippy tree hugger” does usually sell out, buying a gas-guzzling SUV and settling down in the suburbs. But for those stalwart souls who actually refuse to eat meat, or even more radically refuse to eat any product associated with animal exploitation the politician has absolutely *no control over!* Like modern day Gandhi-era activists the vegan movement will not compromise, and although they may be few in number, by refusing participation in what they rightly deem an unjust system of exploitation, their witness as moral exemplars is left untarnished. People may call them, “whack-jobs,” people may deride and insult them, but through their ongoing moral practice of non-participation an entire system can be labeled unjust. Chickens stored shoulder to shoulder while pumped full of hormones in 95 degree heat will not escape the notice of those who have committed their lives to a meatless diet. Similarly, cows that have been butchered following a life-time of near-continuous milk production through artificial insemination can no longer become one’s next McDonald’s quarter-pounder without at least some collective voice of moral dissent.

My own personal experience with “conscientious objection” demonstrated for me both the effectiveness of both moral practices and non-participation in injustice. In 2007, while in attendance at Officer’s Training for the U.S. Army Chaplaincy I was severely reprimanded for having

prayed in “Jesus Christ’s Name” and according to the traditional Christian Trinitarian formula. What sustained me through such a trying time was not some disembodied *individualism*, but instead the practices of prayer, listening to Christian music, and the veneration of an Icon of Christ which was given to me by the Greek Orthodox priest also in attendance at Chaplaincy Training. Prayer, singing and veneration were the embodied practices that made my refusal to pray in non-Christian ways an automatic response. Similarly, whether the community was Korean Presbyterians or a Greek Orthodox former Southern Baptist from Kentucky “the faithful” who did not give in to the pressure of conformity was for me the moral community of *resistance* that allowed me to sustain the onslaught of restrictions on my religious freedom.

Thus, although the thin veneer of environmentalism will be a mantle that both political parties will seek to wear, it will be through the *committed*, through those who refuse to compromise with evil who will remain the prophets of our age. I should know. I have become one of them. Now, although the political process will take years to institute better, more humane legislation in the U.S. farming industry, through agreeing to abide by a strictly vegetarian diet I will no longer be complicit in an unjust system of natural degradation. This is not to say that the eating of animal flesh is outlawed by my religious tradition for it is not. The Jew may eat kosher meat and the Christian may eat any meat. But, unlike the original context in which Acts of the Apostles (or the Torah) were written and with the advent of technological sophistication that literally grinds humanity, animals, and the entire world into its “cost-benefit” analysis-driven *raw utility*, the need for abstention from certain *kinds* of meat is pressing upon the American Evangelical conscience. How can one be “Pro-Life,” yet also support a society of raw utility in which our babies will grow into egoistic “monsters” whose bellies will be filled with injustice, whose brains will seek only instant gratification sexually and whose souls will have been poisoned by a technological-secularism devoid of human empathy? Though eating meat is in no ways forbidden for the Christian, or for the Jew, it is nonetheless a step forward to consider adopting this monastic-like practice for a season or two. For Catholics, this should be easy since “meatless Fridays” have been a monastic-like discipline for centuries. For the secularist, this will be an easy choice, but only to the extent that such moral uniformity is grounded in truth. Such truth, obviously, can only be found in Christ Jesus the LORD, and it is through Christ alone that such injustice will be truly transformed into a more just relationship between humans and the animal friends for whom we live as stewards. Finally, as Wendell Berry’s observations remind us, the link between human exploitation and how we treat the environment is one well worth remembering, and it is for such humanitarian concerns that even the most “conservative” political voter should pay attention to the growing trend within American Evangelicalism and Catholicism.

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READERS MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN THE ARTICLE (FORWARDED TO US BY ROB KING) BY MICHAEL BRUNER, "FAITH AND FACTORY FARMS" (Washingtonpost.com 13 August 2008)

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/08/faith_and_factory_farms.html

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Good Quote:

“. . . individuation means precisely the better and more complete fulfillment of the collective qualities of the human being, since adequate consideration of the peculiarity of the individual is more conducive to a better social performance than when the peculiarity is neglected or suppressed . . . . The idiosyncrasy of an individual is not to be understood as any strangeness in his substance or in his components, but rather as a unique combination, or gradual differentiation, of functions and faculties which in themselves are universal.” Carl G. Jung (*The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious*, Princeton U. Press, 1966, pgs. 173-174). [[back to page one](#)]