TWO NOVELISTS OF THE ABSURD: 
HELLER AND KESEY*

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Only twice since the Second World War, in Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, have serious American novelists made a conscious effort to transport the novel into the realm of the absurd — up to now the realm occupied principally by European dramatists and novelists (such as Genet and Kafka) and by Albee and Kopit in the United States. Certain American novels, among them Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King, Norman Mailer's Barbary Shore, and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, have sidled to the threshold only to be caught up short before they could cross it — apparently by the novelists' allegiance to tradition in form and content. But Heller and Kesey plunge enthusiastically across, hopefully enhancing or redirecting tradition, clearly in the belief that they can more easily reach their audience by chopping away at its preconceptions of order both in life and in art. The popular as well as critical success of both novels is evidence enough that Heller and Kesey may be right, and certainly justifies a critical examination of each novel in terms of its effort to reduce the world to, and reconstruct it as, absurdity. The examination is the more justified since one effort has been a brilliant success while the other remains a magnificent failure.

Catch-22 is a disconcerting book; it alternately attracts and repels, delights and bores. "If I were a major critic," Norman Mailer has written with becoming modesty, "it would be a virtuoso performance to write a definitive piece on Catch-22. It would take ten thousand words or more." But Mailer proceeded to devote only about a thousand words to the one elaborate joke (Do you walk to work or carry your lunch?) upon which the novel is built; and a close reading of the text in terms of texture and tone reveals only that its complexity is superficial, that its variety is only apparent, that its apparent repetitiveness is unfortunately only too real.

The novel proceeds from Heller's discovery that everything in the modern world is up for grabs; that nothing — and therefore, ipso facto, everything — makes coherent, logical sense. By the ancient comic device of portraying the preposterous as normal, it is possible to make of this discovery something delight-

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fully, often uproariously, funny, and Heller is superb at the creation of this kind of comedy.

Nearly everything and everybody in Catch-22 is outlandish, wacky. There is Lt. Scheisskopf, whose monomaniacal love for dress parades finally earns him promotion to General. There is ex-PFC Wintergreen, who, for all practical purposes, runs the war from his clerk’s desk by manipulating orders and memoranda. There is the Major named Major Major Major, who got his rank through an understandable IBM error, who doesn’t want the rank nor know how to use it, and who consequently flees his office through a window whenever he is about to be approached with a problem. And there are others, equally wacky, but in a far more vicious, deadly sense. There is Captain Black, who, out of jealousy of Major Major, institutes the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade in order to prove that Major Major is a Communist by the simple device of refusing to let him sign the Oath (“You never heard him denying it until we began accusing him, did you?”). There is Col. Cathcart, who is most upset to learn that enlisted men pray to the same God as officers (recall the famous Mauldin cartoon of the sunset) and that God listens to them; whose one great dream is to be immortalized in a feature story in the Saturday Evening Post, and who, to achieve this end, keeps upping the number of missions his squadron must fly until he has tripled the required number. There is Cpl. Whitcomb, the Chaplain’s assistant, who devises a form letter to take care of the growing casualties resulting from Col. Cathcart’s policy; the letter reads in part: “Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs.: Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father, or brother was killed, wounded, or reported missing in action.” And finally — though there are many others who could and some readers would argue should be mentioned — there is Milo Minderbinder, angle-shooter extraordinary, caricature of the American businessman. He forms a syndicate, M & M Enterprises, dealing in everything imaginable from Lebanese cedar to Dutch tulips, Swiss cheeses, Spanish oranges, and Egyptian cotton. He insists that he operates a legitimate business in the American way, for each member of the squadron is a shareholder in the syndicate; and, since business is above quarrels between nations, there are English, French, German, and Italian partners in the syndicate as well — all of which makes very little difference since the profits are all plowed back into the business anyway, and there are no holds to share. Milo sells petroleum and ball bearings to the Germans and even contracts with them, in a major coup for the syndicate, to bomb and strafe his own airfield with planes of its own squadron. And because he is successful in the Ameri-

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can tradition — that is, because his books show a substantial
profit — Milo is admired and respected by the American people;
even, though somewhat grudgingly, by those who lost loved ones
in the bombing and strafing.

Lt. John Yossarian, a bomber pilot from whose point of
view we observe most of the action, is one of the few even
moderately "normal" characters in the novel. The others — the
Chaplain, Doc Daneeka, Major Danby, each a friend and confi-
dant of Yossarian — are all caught up to some degree in the
prevailing absurdity. But Yossarian is not. Each of his actions,
preposterous, indeed crazy though it might be, is carefully cal-
culated both to protest the absurdity and to get him out of com-
bat if not clean out of the service. He complains of a non-existent
liver pain in order to be hospitalized to await the pain's, becoming
jaundice so that it can be treated. (The first variation of the
elaborate joke: the doctors can cure jaundice, but a simple pain
in the liver they cannot cure, whether the pain exists or not.)
Yossarian censors enlisted men's mail by editing the letters un-
mercifully, sometimes deleting all modifiers and articles, some-
times blacking out all but the salutation and close; and he signs
as the name of the censoring officer either Washington Irving or
Irving Washington. He either goes to sleep or behaves boorish-
ly at briefing sessions. On the day that he is to be awarded a
medal he appears in ranks totally nude, protesting that his uni-
form is covered with the blood of the man whose death earned
him the medal. But his counter-absurdity campaign is fruitless,
the world being what it is. In the first place, Yossarian is not
considered crazy by his superiors but simply insubordinate, and
therefore eligible not for a Section-8, but for flying more combat
missions. In the second place, there is the magnificently absurd
logic of Catch-22 "Which specified that a concern for one's own
safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was
the process of a rational mind." All one must do to be grounded
for mental reasons, Doc Daneeka explains to Yossarian, is to
ask; but asking is proof that one is not crazy. Put in another
way: "If he flew [more missions] he was crazy and didn't have
to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to."

The novel moves by fits and starts toward Yossarian's event-
tual desertion, but this is not a forward movement. It really does
not go anywhere that it has not already been in its first few
pages, albeit with slight variations in situation and character.
In addition, there is no clearly juxtapositional relationship
among its episodes; they are by and large interchangeable — so
much so that many of them could actually be removed without
in the least marring the novel's structure. In fact, since Heller
tends to tell the same joke and laugh the same ironic laugh over

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and over again, removing some of the episodes could cut down the repetitiveness, the redundancy, and improve the novel considerably. Plotless really, the book is unified by the pattern of absurdity established at its outset. But this is a tenuous unity at best; and it is here, faced with chaotic structure and endless repetition of episodes which individually are often quite funny, that one begins to feel doubt and dissatisfaction about the novel. Somehow, one feels, it would have been better if it had been better made.

In one sense, this criticism may seem rather picayune; after all, the novel remains brilliantly comic, episodic or not. But in another, higher sense, the criticism is of major seriousness, for the episodic flaw is symptomatic of the novel's failure — and most importantly, of its failure on its own terms: as absurd. The artist must have a position, a point of view, some awareness of what things should or could be in order to be aware of the absurdity of things as they are. Without such an awareness, he really has nothing to portray — and the portrayal of nothing as absurd equals the portrayal of nothing as nothing. And (here Heller is hoist by his own petard, Catch-22 itself) all of the absurd episodes imaginable cannot turn his work into something — above all, cannot make it absurd.

Heller could have used Milo Minderbinder, the soldier-businessman who profits so heavily from the non-sense of war, to crystallize a direction and purpose for the book. The anonymous writer who reviewed the novel for Daedalus (which review was reprinted as a feature in the National Observer) apparently had this possibility in mind when he wrote that "Catch-22 is immoral because it follows a fashion in spitting indiscriminately at business and the professions, at respectability, at ideals, at all visible tokens of superiority. It is a leveling book in the worst sense, leveling everything and everyone downward." However, Milo is far too outlandish a character, far too preposterous and overdrawn to contribute to any sort of social criticism, let alone to the leftist-nihilism suggested in the review. Milo is the only character who can support the reviewer's conclusion, yet the conclusion is hardly inescapable; the evidence in fact would seem as justifiably to indicate that Heller is conservative, that by means of reducing Milo to the ridicule of caricature, he has reduced social criticism itself, especially of businessmen, to the same level. Still, it is difficult to believe that either conclusion is accurate. It seems most reasonable to believe that Heller consciously and intentionally failed to use Milo as any sort of social critical foil, that he feared that doing so would impose a serious upon the novel the responsibility for which he did not wish to assume.

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Yet finally, as if he were suddenly convinced that the novel needed some direction and purpose — needed, so to speak, to be rescued from itself — Heller invests Yossarian with idealism and nobility of motive. In a scene recognized even by Robert Brustein in his extremely favorable review as "an inspirational sequence which is the weakest thing in the book," Yossarian justifies his imminent desertion against an appeal to his patriotism and his anti-Nazi conscience: "'Christ, Danby,'" he argues; "'I earned that medal I got.... I've flown seventy goddam combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country.... The Germans will be beaten in a few months. And Japan will be beaten a few months after that. If I were to give up my life now, it wouldn't be for my country.'" The weakness of the sequence is of course that it is totally unconvincing. There is nothing wrong with an American novelist being in favor of the Second World War; Heller would in fact be unique if he opposed it. But since he appears to be opposed to it throughout the novel, there is something wrong with Yossarian, even as Heller's spokesman, mouthing pro-war sentiments. The statement constitutes a reversal of intention almost as flagrant as Wouk's in *The Caine Mutiny*; it really negates or denies the novel. One might forgive it if Heller could see it as even moderately integral, if the novel had prepared the way for it. But such is not the case; the sequence is not added up to, it is simply added on, an afterthought, as if Heller were saying: "You see? This has all been a joke — good, clean fun with overtones of the macabre to titilate. But underneath there has really been something deep and important going on." Unfortunately, however, there hasn't been.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is as tightly organized and directed as *Catch-22* is loose and unfocussed. It has few wasted moments or scenes; it has no wasted characters. The novel's greatest strength lies in Kesey's refusal to throw his people away for the sake of comic effect. Most of the characters in the novel, all of the principal ones, are connected with a madhouse, as either confinees or keepers. This is a situation made to order for the kind of comedy at which Heller excels, but Kesey expands it, enlarges it. His people are funny, but not in the same way as Heller's. They are not truly mad, for one thing — nearly all of them are voluntarily committed — they are "touched," tipped toward differentness by idiosyncrasy or physical disability. And while on the surface the differentness is preposterous, hence comical, as one digs beneath the surface he becomes uneasily aware that the differentness is really normality aggravated and extended. In other words, the seeds of the madness of Kesey's

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characters are in each one of us, sublimated, dormant, but waiting disconcertingly close to the surface.

There is neither a Scheisskopf nor a Major Major here — no sort of innocent wackiness. Neither is there a Capt. Black, or Col. Cathcart, or Milo Minderbinder — no vicious innocents whose potentiality for evil is vitiated by their utter outlandishness. There is Dale Harding, intellectual, incipient homosexual, who married a very sexy woman in order to assert a manhood which he did not possess, and who, by accusation and innuendo, has forced his wife into acts the awareness of which has driven him into the institution. Harding is master of a highly literate nastiness when referring to his wife; the other side of his coin is Ruckly, whose mind has been so scrambled by an attendant’s error in administering electro-therapy that he can only react to the word “wife,” and whose reaction is always a violent “Ffffuck da wife!” the only three words he can say. There is Martini, who sees things, including Ruckly’s wife (“‘Oh. Het? Yeah, I see here. Yeah.’”), and whose participation in a Monopoly game (“‘What’s thum other things? Hold it a minute. What’s thum other things all over the board?’”) makes for a crazily comic scene. But Martini’s tendency to complete pictures is nightmarish as well as comic: when he sees straps, his imagination supplies men to be bound by them. There is Billy Bibbitt, thirty-five year old virgin, who stutters out of an impotence which is incurable because he stutters; and who answers when he is asked when he first stuttered: “‘Fir-first stutter? First stutter? The first word I said I st-stuttered: m-m-m-m-mam-ma.’” There is the senile Colonel Matterson who lifts the nurses’ skirts with his cane, and who continually lectures from an imaginary text in his hand: “‘America is . . . tell-ah-vision . . . The But-ter . . . is the Re-pub-li-can party.’” And there is Chief Bromden, from whose paranoic point of view we see much of the action and receive much of the commentary on it. The Chief is a giant American Indian who has been driven into a terror-stricken depression by his contacts with the white world, especially the white business world. He pretends to be a deaf mute in order to avoid all human contact. He believes that time and all events and all men’s actions are guided from an enormous control panel hidden in the nurses’ office. He is given to hallucinations in which pain and death figure prominently, and when these become too real, he escapes by retreating entirely within himself; but he sees his retreat as an engulfment by fog from a gigantic Army surplus fog-machine installed in the vents of the ward by the same authorities who built the control panel. He fights back at authority by collecting wads of chewing gum, chewing them soft again, and sticking them under his bed.

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Funny? Yes and no. We may laugh, but the laughter is not the same as that which we give to Catch-22. It has echoes; it is brittle. Any feeling that we might have had on beginning the book that Kesey has cheated, has taken the downhill road toward a portrayal of the absurdly comic — as, for example, Jacobean dramatists often did by setting scenes in Bedlam — is obviated by the wryness of our laughter. But even more importantly, it is obviated by the fact that Kesey shapes his unique cast of characters into a society, close-knit, functioning; a society in which the norm is differentness — a society of disaffiliates. But the characters are strange disaffiliates, aware of their differentness and only occasionally defensive, and seldom angry, about it. "‘All of us here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world,’ ” Harding says. “‘Oh, don’t misunderstand me, we’re not in here because we are rabbits — we’d be rabbits wherever we were — we’re all in here because we can’t adjust to our rabbithood.’ ” The mirror then which they hold up to life is warped both horizontally and vertically, and the image we see in it is and is not ourselves, is — and is not — comic.

Set against this society is Miss Ratched, called Big Nurse by the patients. Except for a tremendous mammalian development, she is a quite ordinary-looking, fifty-year-old woman. In the eyes of the outside world, she is absolutely normal; indeed, she is a perfect representative of a standardized, conformist, correct outside world, whose elemental desire is to protect itself against non-conformity or incorrectness either by conversion (that is, by cure) or by exile (that is, by incarceration). Chief Bromden sees the nurse as a representative of "the ‘Combine’ . . . a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as . . . the Inside.” He sees her as the operator of the control panel, wielding

a sure power that extends in all directions on hairlike wires too small for anybody’s eyes but mine; I see her sit in this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her work with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants . . . . What she dreams of there in the center of those wires is a world of precision, efficiency and tidiness like a pocket watch with a glass back, a place where the schedule is unbreakable and all the patients who aren’t Outside, obedient under her beam, are wheelchair Chronics with catheter tubes run direct from every pantleg to the sewer under the floor.
But ironically, because the world Inside is a society, once the nurse enters it, she loses her normality. Despite her power, despite the supporting power of the Outside, once she comes In, all of her normal actions and beliefs become nonsense; or rather, they make sense only in so far as the society Inside permits them to. Her position is at best tenuous; she may define herself as normal only at the whim or recognizance of the inmates. "We need a good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place," Harding continues. "I simply need her to make me happy with my role [as a rabbit]." If that need should be destroyed, the nurse would fall into the ultimately preposterous position, for the conformist, of disaffiliation — a position only a step removed from absurdity. Aware of this possibility, though far too confidently normal to see it in these terms, Big Nurse has surrounded herself with a staff which she controls absolutely and which in turn can exert maximum control over the inmates. Her three orderlies are frightened semi-sadists who relish their permission to tyrannize the patients as a compensation for their fear of the nurse and their strong feelings of inferiority — it is neither accident nor racism that Kesey makes them Negroes or that one of them, a dwarf, is the result of his mother's rape by a white man. She controls the selection of the psychiatrist for her ward simply by being there before him, by having rigidly established policies, and by her attitude, that is, her willingness or unwillingness to cooperate, which can either make or break his usefulness. Dr. Spivey, her psychiatrist at the time of the novel, is a meek ineffectual theorizor who sympathizes with the actual problems of the patients, but has no real understanding of them and is made so uncomfortable by them that his tendency, somewhat akin to Major Major's, is to run away from them, down to his office to draw on graphs.

Into this cuckoo's nest drops Randle Patrick McMurphy who, by beating up fellow convicts on a prison farm, had contrived to have the state commit him to the easy life of the nest for diagnosis and treatment as a potentially dangerous psychopath. Drunk, brawler, gambler, ladies' man, hell-raiser extraordinary, McMurphy is the only true misfit, the only true disaffiliate in the nest; and he brings into it an independence, a self-confidence, and a hatred of authority destined to upset the delicate balance of preposterousnesses and tip the scales toward absurdity.

In small and large ways, he makes a shambles of the routine, the procedures, the fixed positions, the order of the nest. He refuses to remove his cap, day or night. He dashes about wearing only black undershorts with red-eyed white whales emblazoned on them ("'From a co-ed at Oregon State ... a Literary major .... She gave them to me because she said I

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was a symbol’ ”). He asks the Big Nurse if she has ever measured the distance from nipple to nipple of her enormous breasts; and, as latrine orderly, he pastes small slips of paper with obscenities written backward on them under the lips of the bowls so that the nurse will see them when she inspects, first-sergeant fashion, with a mirror. He promotes the setting up of a game room, then wins all of the other patients’ money at blackjack and poker. He organizes the patients into a basketball team and has them practice dribbling and passing up and down the ward while he shouts instructions and blows shrilly on a whistle.

These are only a few examples of the sort of guerilla warfare McMurphy conducts against the nurse’s authority. On a more significant level, he forces the theoretical democracy of the ward, under which the patients had always voted on policy which the Big Nurse had actually dictated, into a true democracy, by campaigning, lobbying, cajoling the electorate. The patients vote to watch the World Series on television over the nurse’s strenuous objection that doing so would interfere with occupational therapy; and when she vetoes their vote by cutting off the power which feeds the television set, the patients, following McMurphy’s lead, simply pretend to watch it, laughing at and cheering the blank screen while the nurse explodes. The patients vote, again overriding the nurse’s protest, to accompany McMurphy on a deep-sea fishing trip arranged by his “aunt,” a golden-hearted prostitute named Candy. The trip is delightfully comic; everyone relaxes, especially McMurphy, who spends most of his time in the cabin with Candy, and Dr. Spivey, whom McMurphy had conned into accompanying the group as its legal attendant, and who catches the largest fish.

The immediate motive for McMurphy’s antics, in addition to a simple sense of fun and a straightforward lust for life, complemented by a hatred and fear of authority and discipline (early in the novel, he identifies the Big Nurse as a “‘ball-cutter,’ ” one of those people “‘who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line . . . to live like they want you to’ ” by “‘going for your vitals’ ”) is a hard-headed self-interest. McMurphy enters the nest to get out of hard work, teaches the patients to gamble in order to win their money, and pursues his wild course partly at least because he had bet the patients that he could cause the nurse to lose her icy composure by means of it — a bet which he wins as she screams at them watching the blank television screen.

As long as these remain his sole motivations, McMurphy is in magnificent control of the situation in the nest. But slowly, gradually his self-interest begins to expand, and a new motive
subsumes the other three: a feeling of responsibility to and for the other inmates of the nest, a desire, a need, to protect their vitals from the nurse’s shears. And with the strengthening of the new motive, McMurphy begins to lose control and to expose his own vitals. He continues to harrass the nurse long after he has collected the bet, long after he learns that she dictates the length of his confinement, not the court-imposed sentence to the prison farm. And when the new motivation leads him to defend another patient from one of the ward attendants and a violent fight ensues, the Big Nurse starts to snip away. McMurphy is strait-jacketed and hauled off for a calming electrotherapy treatment.

Three successive shocks fail to castrate McMurphy, though they roughen his composure and blunt his exuberance sufficiently that, when he is returned to the ward, his hell-raising gaiety is less spontaneous, more forced. And, of course, he over-compensates. Before his sentence to electro-therapy, he had planned a little midnight party in the ward the main purpose of which was to be the destruction of Billy Bibbitt’s virginity by “Aunt” Candy. But now, as McMurphy struggles to reassert control, the party develops into a wild bacchanalian wing-ding, the climax of all the harrassment, all the antics, all the anti-authoritarian nose-thumbing. The party appears at first reading to be the weakest episode in the novel; both its humor and its point are blurred at about the time the patients break into the supply room to drink cherry-flavored alcohol-and-codeine cough syrup. But perhaps Kesey may be forgiven for overdoing the episode, since he is trying to show that the form of protest which the party represents will no longer work; that it is at best sterile and at worst destructive; that a man, once committed, cannot by any means, but especially by a reductio ad absurdum, postpone his rush toward destiny — though that destiny itself be the ultimate absurdity.

On the surface, the party is a huge success, with everyone getting happily drunk, the ward being satisfactorily demolished, and McMurphy sleeping with Candy’s friend, Sandy. It is climaxd the following morning as Big Nurse discovers the now non-virginal, non-stuttering Billy Bibbitt wrapped peacefully in Candy’s arms. But with one quick snip, the nurse turns success to failure, manhood to whimpering despair. She tells Billy that it is her duty to inform his mother of his actions, and he suddenly stutters so badly that he cannot even protest. Distracted, cowering, Billy is taken to await the doctor’s arrival, and while alone in the office, he commits suicide by cutting his throat with a scalpel.

Immediately the nurse turns her weapon on McMurphy,
charging him with driving Billy to his death. And with his defenses dissipated by the party’s nightmare ending, McMurphy finds himself face to face with Catch-22, uncluttered, pin-point sharp — a thin absurd line stretched tautly between the comic and the tragic. Either to deny or to accept responsibility for Billy’s death is to admit that he is mad, and is to negate all that his weeks of struggle have achieved, is in fact to make futile the death itself. For the death to be meaningful McMurphy must win, must be free, must live; but in order to win he must lose, in order to be free he must bind himself inextricably, in order to live he must be destroyed. The only alternative is to desert the struggle, and, his motive crystallized by the nurse’s accusation, McMurphy rejects it. “‘We couldn’t stop him,’ ” says Chief Bromden:

because we were the ones making him do it. It wasn’t the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need that was making him push himself slowly up from sitting, his big hands driving down on the leather chair arms, pushing him up, rising and standing like one of those moving-picture zombies, obeying orders beamed at him from forty masters. It was us that had been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out, weeks of making him wink and grin and laugh and go on with his act long after his humor had been parched dry between two electrodes.

Hitching up his black shorts, McMurphy rips the nurse’s uniform down the front so that “the two nipple circles started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light,” and knocking her backward, crawls atop her and sinks his fingers into her throat.

Before he can complete the murder, McMurphy is dragged away, back to disturbed, back to the completion of his castration, the price he must pay for his victory. For he does win; with the sacrifice of his own manhood he buys back the manhood of most of the other inmates. One by one the Acutes, the walking wounded, leave the nest, until only three are left when McMurphy is wheeled back in, no longer McMurphy, his arms thin and helpless, his face chalky and blank except for the purple bruises around his eyes which are the after-effects of a lobotomy. Among those remaining is Chief Bromden, determined that McMurphy shall not be made to lose any more than his life, shall not be forced to pay with his dignity as well as his manhood for the freedom of the inmates. In the night, he consummates McMurphy’s symbolic sacrifice by smothering what is left of him.
with a pillow. Then the Chief too, a giant once more, whole and unafraid, strides away from the nest.

Everything in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* drives inexorably toward this denouncement, and therein rests the novel’s strength. There is no waste; there are no loose ends tied together by after-the-fact, jerry-built rationalizations. The conflict between McMurphy the disaffiliate — pushing and being pushed into a commitment which, Kesey implies, only the disaffiliate can choose to make — and Big Nurse — Milo Minderbinder focussed and pointed, society, order, the Combine-syndicate — begins from an almost philosophic necessity and proceeds inevitably to McMurphy’s “victory” through self-sacrifice. In addition, without harming the tightness of the novel, Kesey writes on the figurative as well as on the literal level, enriching the novel’s texture and at the same time clarifying its conflict. Thus the nurse’s tremendous bust, coupled with her essential asexuality (“I couldn’t get it up over [her] even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe,” says McMurphy, the self-confessed whambam man), label the social pressure of the Combine as matriarchal, and underscore the tragedy of Billy Bibbitt as the motivating force behind McMurphy’s self-destructive violent attack on her. And the bust, in conjunction with the whales emblazoned on McMurphy’s shorts, set her forth as Ahab’s nemesis, the evil in good which Ahab must destroy and be destroyed by; and, of course, McMurphy is Ahab, good in evil, driving beyond hope of return toward guilt and expiation. Even more appropriately, considering the selfish-altruistic duality of McMurphy’s motivation, Kesey draws freely from Christian symbolism to reinforce his points. So, for example, the electro-therapy table is shaped like a crucifix, McMurphy is hung upon it three times, and he asks “Do I get a crown of thorns?” just before the dials are twisted. And Kesey integrates the symbolism perfectly, carrying the Christian parallel to its logical conclusion by causing Chief Bromden, McMurphy’s biographer, his priest, to murder the already dead victor-victim, thus partaking of the sacrifice in order that he may live whole, renewed, a man again.

Kesey creates finally in McMurphy a modern un-hero or anti-hero who expands himself, through a gradual shift in his concern from himself to those around him, into the role of the traditional hero. It is a strange and preposterous role, the more preposterous since McMurphy retains his anti-heroic qualities throughout the transition — the prostitute Candy emphasizes the strangeness by calling him a McMurphy, as if he were a condition or a state of being. In the modern world, such a hero, individualistic to the point of disaffiliation but at the same time altruistic to the point of self-sacrifice, is by definition absurd;

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and all people and actions touched by such heroism are tinted by its absurdity. Accordingly, such heroes must end in tragedy, like Ahab or Jesus, or, and this comparison seems yet more fruitful, like Kafka's Joseph K., who is caught in the same absurd situation as McMurphy, who battles the Combine as stubbornly as McMurphy, who is pursued by the furies of responsibility as relentlessly as McMurphy, and who dies, as all McMurphys must die, figuratively driving the knife into his own throat.

There are flaws in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* — Kesey shifts point of view frequently, largely because of the undependability of Chief Bromden as an observer; some of the Chief's introspection, though interesting enough, drags a bit; and the possibility that the climactic party scene may be somewhat overdone has already been mentioned. But the flaws are minor; they are the sort that often serve to make first novels even more interesting because they result from the novelist's serious and sincere hard work. There is no flabbiness, there are no episodic loose ends in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as there so obviously are in *Catch-22*. Kesey's book is controlled, tight; it moves forward with the inevitability of great argument. And as we have seen, perhaps paradoxically, the successful portrayal of absurdity, because it requires a tightness rather than a looseness of form, also requires argument, the positing of directions from which and toward which and around which the action and the characters may move — requires, if you will, at least the potential existence of the Court or Godot or the Rhinocerous or an American Dream or a Combine. If the argument should control the novel; if, for example, Kesey had allowed his work to be dominated by the Big Nurse-Combine equation or by anti-electro therapy propaganda, then the novel would have slipped toward the documentary and failed for precisely the opposite reasons that *Catch-22* fails: because it would contain too much something rather than too much nothing. But Kesey maintains control; though his positions and his allegiances are never in doubt, his arguments are not dominant but integral, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* thus becomes the first truly successful American novel of the absurd since World War II.