

Redefining the I-dentity:
The Role of the Individual and the Community in the Works of Joseph Heller

By

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Abstract

This thesis is largely an investigation of community in its many varied and changing forms. More specifically, the thesis examines the ways in which communities, particularly preconceptions of authorial and ethnic communities, are imagined, deconstructed, and ultimately redefined in the works of Joseph Heller. As a Jewish American author, Heller focuses his texts on outsider characters, characters who do not fit easily within the conceived boundaries of either the literary canon or Jewish society. These characters, who bear striking similarities to Heller with regard to their personal histories and literary careers, frequently express their deep-rooted anxieties about their status within their communities by first denigrating and destabilizing the larger community as a defense mechanism. When this bout of antagonistic negation subsides, Heller's characters confront their doubts about the validity of their own status within the communal whole. Finally, through their most intense, concentrated tirade against the community, the characters discover a way to redefine communal boundaries and re-envision themselves as members of the whole. Through this process of simultaneous revulsion and reaffirmation, these characters seek to similarly reshape their readers' interpretation of their work as they transform themselves into insiders of the group.

As a postmodern Jewish American author, Heller often examines two groups of particular concern to him in his later texts: the Modernist canonical community and the Jewish community. The thesis begins with an exploration of authorial identity, progresses into a study of communal Jewish Identity and the individual, and culminates in a detailed analysis of how the two identities fuse in Heller's third novel, *Good as Gold*.

Chapter one investigates Heller's relationship to a broader authorial community through the internal monologue of Eugene Pota, the fictional protagonist in Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*. The novel focuses on Pota, who is, in many ways, representative of Heller, as he tries to free his work from the shadow of his Modernist predecessors and the success of his own first publication. While Pota cannot insert himself into the literary canon along with figures like James Joyce, a Modernist of particular concern in this book, he can develop ways to reinterpret his texts and identify with the anxieties of his ancestors in order to join their ranks.

Similarly, chapter two focuses on Heller's relationship to the Jewish Identity, the shared understanding of cultural boundaries within the Jewish community, through his two ethnocentric novels *God Knows* and *Good as Gold*. In both books, the protagonists view their Jewish heritage with mocking tones and also think of themselves as outsiders of their culture. For both, the absence of religion and meaningful identification with their conception of Jewishness spawns their attack on the Jewish community. Yet, as each novel progresses, the characters begin to revise their view of Jewishness as a whole and to redefine their membership within a new understanding of the Jewish community.

The thesis concludes with a case study of *Good as Gold*, a novel centered on one man's attempt to write the book of "The Jewish Experience." Bruce Gold, the main character, embodies an amalgamation of the authorial and ethnic identity crises. As a floundering Jewish American author without a clear sense of a Jewish Identity, Gold needs to rethink his relationship to his writing and his Jewishness in order to validate his own sense of self.

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Short Titles

- GG:* Heller, Joseph. *Good as Gold*. New York: Pocket Books, 1976.
- GK:* Heller, Joseph. *God Knows*. New York: Dell, 1984.
- JH:* Ruderman, Judith. *Joseph Heller*. New York: Continuum, 1991.
- NT:* Heller, Joseph. *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- PA:* Heller, Joseph. *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Figures

Figure 1. Example of Eugene Pota's prewriting character sketches in *Portrait of an Artist*, 17

Figure 2. Example of Eugene Pota's prewriting notes in *Portrait of an Artist*, 18

Introduction

Two summers ago, I picked up a book from a used bookstore in downtown Ann Arbor. I'm not exactly sure why I picked it up – it wasn't by my favorite author, and its topic did not seem particularly gripping at the time – but, since I have picked it up, I have yet to put it down. Like many readers and critics alike, my familiarity with Joseph Heller extended only so far as a required high-school reading of *Catch-22*.¹ I knew nothing of his history, his life, or his career. But, after reading through the first few pages of his posthumous novel, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, I knew I had hit upon a goldmine.

I began my research for this project captivated by the multitude of connections I noticed between Joseph Heller and one of his foremost predecessors, James Joyce. In this final novel specifically, Heller references Joyce explicitly at least four times and intimates an allusion to him many more over the course of its relatively sparse two hundred thirty-three pages.² In interviews with Heller and critical writings on his books, Joyce receives a brief mention as one potential model for Heller's ethnic representation and structural development.³ The more I read, the more convinced I became that Heller's book served as Heller's direct acknowledgement and scathing critique of Joyce's influence. However, as I read and re-read Heller's texts over the next few months, I realized that this initial argument only scratched the surface of his interactions with the canonical community of authors to which Joyce belongs.

Although Heller blatantly references Joyce and dozens of other prominent writers in his last book, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, the purpose of his text is not to solidify the connection between his predecessors' work and his own – regardless of his similarity to any

¹ Whenever I mentioned my thesis topic to friends and acquaintances (including some of my professors), the response I heard most often was one of shock that Joseph Heller had written anything aside from *Catch-22*.

² Heller's novels are often more than four hundred pages long.

³ For example, Judith Ruderman, Charles Powers, Sam Merrill, Paul Krassner, Charles Ruas, and Lawrence Grobel all mention Joyce in relation to Joseph Heller's works.

single predecessor artist.⁴ Heller incorporates subtle quotations of figures like James Joyce, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner in this text, but his use of such literary quotations paradoxically serves to distinguish his style from theirs. The novel's main protagonist, Eugene Pota, acknowledges his place as the successor of a long, complex literary history by citing his predecessors so freely in what is to be his last novel. However, as the novel progresses, Pota highlights the idea that critical comparisons between others' work and his own actually say very little about either the predecessor or the successor author, and, as a result, his own work appears to be lacking in creativity and aesthetic appeal. He argues that, although he will never be free from associations with past literary movements or socio-historical expectations, he can find a way to better re-envision and redeem his own work through his affiliation with the past rather than in spite of it.

Heller does not launch a direct redemptive campaign in defense of his texts, however. He relies simultaneously on a kind of revulsion and reaffirmation of his craft, debasing that which haunts him (authorship and identity) while, at the same time, venerating it. Particularly in his later novels, Heller unites his relationship with his authorial and ethnic communities as two of the most disquieting aspects of his personal identity and attempts to deconstruct both parts through an intensive scrutiny of his community boundaries. Though he initially seeks to divest himself from these established communities, he realizes he is wedded to his status both as an author and as a Jew, and, in the end, he would not want to renounce either of them.

Thus, this thesis focuses largely on Heller's interactions with his envisioned communities of authorship and ethnicity. Chapter one begins this analysis by engaging "the anxiety of influence" as part of a larger definition of a successful authorial community. Specifically, this

⁴ The title of Heller's last novel is strikingly similar to Joyce's famous *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. However, when I use the short title *Portrait of an Artist*, I am referring to Heller's novel, distinguished by the article "an."

chapter employs authors like Harold Bloom and T.S. Eliot to provide a framework for Pota's neurotic obsession with the work of his predecessors. These two authors embody another way of voicing Pota's main fears throughout the text, the fear of not living up to the audience's expectations, and their texts demonstrate the way in which readers look at writers like Eugene Pota (or Joseph Heller) more often as what he is not rather than what he is. Through his lecture, "The Literature of Despair," Pota begins his personal attack on his more famous, canonical brethren and finishes the lecture sympathizing with them as a fellow sufferer from the nature of his craft. Pota comes to realize the relative fluidity of communal boundaries and learns he must insert himself into his community in order to belong.

Likewise, the second chapter explores the construction of an ethnic community in Heller's later texts, focusing primarily on his two explicitly ethnocentric novels: *Good as Gold* and *God Knows*. In both texts, Heller creates a narrative based on the inner thoughts of one Jewish character, a character who appears more like an outsider of the Jewish community than a valid member at the outset. Bruce Gold, a man who was raised to be culturally Jewish if not religiously, initially refutes his Jewishness and desires to be considered as American as the WASPish Washington snobs with whom he associates. King David, the protagonist in *God Knows*, identifies with his Jewishness solely through his faith, which he has lost, and his relationship to Israel, which he is about to lose through his impending death. Heller's irreverent and occasionally offensive depiction of Jewish people and Jewish heritage separates him from even the Jewish American canon, populated by authors like Bernard Malamud, Anzia Yezierska, and Cynthia Ozick. Yet, Heller's texts argue that his characters occupy as legitimate a space in Jewish culture as any other. As Hana Wirth-Nesher and Werner Sollors point out, classifications of ethnicities, and, more specifically, ethnic literature, are often too exclusionary and cannot

appropriately define an entity as abstract as an entire group of people. Heller stresses this idea most strenuously in his ethnocentric novels as he detracts from preconceived ideas of Jewish community and redefines them to accommodate a wider membership. Neither Gold nor David appears to project a praiseworthy or authentic image of Jewish culture, and yet both men assert themselves within the Jewish community by their novel's end.

The third chapter examines the fusion of these two communities, the authorial and the ethnic, in a detailed case study of Heller's third novel, *Good as Gold*. As an author trying to come to terms with and ultimately represent his Jewish experience, Gold confronts his identity in relation to both his lackluster publishing career and his antagonistic interactions with the Jewish community. Heller's narrative of Bruce Gold aligns itself well with that of Eugene Pota in his last *Portrait*, accentuating the connection between the boundaries of celebrated authorship and the boundaries of celebrated identity. Through his repetitive internal monologues, Gold discovers that his unshakable identification with Jewish food, language, and ceremony maintain his fragile affiliation with his Jewish identity. As the novel progresses, Gold learns to consider his Jewish identity in a new light, which will ingratiate rather than separate him from a broader community base.

Whereas most interviews and scholarly research focus on Heller's most successful and recognizable text, *Catch-22*, I have chosen not to engage in a detailed analysis of that particular work. In many ways, Heller's *Portrait of an Artist* addresses the author's concern that his legacy will be based solely on the reputation of his first novel while his successor novels, spanning four decades of his literary career, go relatively unnoticed. This thesis notes that Heller and his critics believe *Catch-22* overshadows an adequate reading of his later work, and in order to more

accurately represent Heller's entire body of literature, I have limited my discussion of this first novel to its appearance in *Portrait*.

Moreover, in light of the relatively sparse research on Heller, I have chosen to devote this thesis to his lesser known, less studied texts. As I navigated the third floor of the Hatcher Graduate Library, I perused the extensive collection of texts on James Joyce, Henry James, and Ernest Hemingway before arriving at the paltry, lone shelf of Heller books. Though a few of those texts provided a semi-comprehensive analysis of Heller's literary career, the majority concentrated on the narrative strategies employed in *Catch-22* in particular. In order to add my own voice to this body of research, I want to shift the reader's attention away from that text momentarily and to look closely at the themes and ideas housed within *God Knows*, *Good as Gold*, and *Portrait of an Artist*.

Finally, while I invoke Joyce most often in my analysis, I am using him more as an example to illustrate the anxiety of influence. This text does not intend to argue that Joyce is, by any means, the only or the most prominent influential figure for Heller's texts. Rather, my discussion of Joyce serves as a model for the ways Heller copes with the established legacy of his predecessors and draws on this legacy for inspiration in his own work. Joyce represents the canon of Modernist authors in Heller's text; my references to Joyce stem from Heller's specific evocation of him.

Although each section of this thesis examines one specific facet of Heller's authorial identity, all are united by this interplay of the individual and the community. Rather than conform to the prescribed boundaries of community which he narrates for himself, Heller chooses to manipulate the boundaries to produce each character's I-identity, a communal identity which pertains first and foremost to the I, the main protagonist, of the text. In order to achieve

this I-identity, the characters must first reject their respective communities through a process of negation, but it is through their reclamation of a communal identity that they can possess their individual sense of belonging.

Chapter 1:

“What’s in a Name?”: The Crisis of Authorship in a Post-Joycean Era

“There are only four basic plots in life anyway, and nine in literature, and everything else is but variation, vanity, and vexation of the spirit.”

-- Joseph Heller

Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man, Joseph Heller’s novel published shortly after his death, delves into an exploration of writing as a process – a process which inevitably frustrates and deflates the author’s psyche before it reaches completion. This process of writing challenges the author’s patience and commitment at the best of times, but for an author like Eugene Pota, whose impending death looms in front of him, the process entails not only developing and completing a work of art but finishing a piece that will improve his reader’s perception of his entire career. Like many authors of his day, Pota worries his writing will fade from memory because it cannot compare to the influence and pervasiveness of its predecessors, both his ancestors’ work and his own past publications. He believes himself to be an outsider in the broader community of published authors; he exists outside the literary canon, where figures like James Joyce are immortalized as literary geniuses to be read for generations to come. As a result of this fear, Pota searches for ways to destabilize the legacy of his predecessor authors, particularly Joyce, in order to bring them down to his level and, in doing so, discovers the way in which he can rise to theirs. Acting as a stand-in for Heller at key points, Pota engages in the derision and devaluation of his predecessors as a necessary step to a reinterpretation of his own authorial legacy.

Heller’s preoccupation with the eminence of his predecessors is not anomalous among his literary peers; many theorists claim that this “anxiety of influence,” as Harold Bloom dubs it, has

plagued the consciousness of authors for centuries, affecting each new generation of writers as they enter into their crafts. Thus, Heller's anxiety becomes not a detriment to his craft but a mark of his entry into a truly serious, dedicated class of authors. Though Heller's last novel, *A Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, focuses on the anxiety of influence as an issue which Eugene Pota, the novel's protagonist, specifically grapples with, his narrative merely expresses the haunting self-doubt which he shares with many writers, both past and present. T.S. Eliot explains, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."¹ Eliot argues that, in some ways, the anxiety of influence is an inescapable, fundamental part of every author, regardless of that author's status in the canon or, in modern society, his place on bestsellers lists. Every author, from T.S. Eliot to James Joyce to Joseph Heller, publishes after a profound and prominent literary movement, complete with a host of profound and prominent writers and, thus, must contend with their inheritance of past writings. W. Jackson Bate expands on Eliot's thought: "We could, in fact, argue that the remorseless deepening of self-consciousness, before the rich and intimidating legacy of the past, has become the greatest single problem that modern art (art, that is to say, since the later seventeenth century) has said to face, and that it will become increasingly so in the future."² As literature continues to develop, the opportunities for original thought appear to dwindle, and artists like Heller wonder whether they will be able to create a body of work to rival their predecessors. As Eliot implies, critical reception is often based on a method of comparison and contrast, but, unlike the kind of appreciation his comparisons

¹ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 38.

² W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1970), 4.

espouse, modern critics focus on the contrast, the signs of innovation, visible in contemporary works, further perpetuating this “anxiety” in their authors.

According to the writings of scholars W. Jackson Bate, Harold Bloom, and, to a lesser extent, T.S. Eliot, the anxiety of influence entails more than just the fear of repeating the past, although many of its components derive from this fear. Bate acknowledges narrative repetition or imitation to be one of the foremost concerns for successor authors, but he refines this definition to encompass the self-perceived lack of ability to achieve the same “scope and power of earlier poetry.”³ Bloom supports this idea of the self-imposed affliction, stating that the anxiety of influence resembles “a disease of self-consciousness” in which the writer becomes obsessed with differentiation and explicit distinction from past movements.⁴ Many critics focus their attention on a work’s artistic innovation and unusual handling of textuality, which is difficult for a new artist to attain in the wake of the predecessor’s glory days. As Eliot maintains, “One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of man.”⁵ The anxiety of influence entails a fear of the inconsistent methods of judgment that may occur when critics interpret the successor’s work, operating under the assumption, Eliot suggests, that anything in literature can be wholly individual or specific to one artist. Successor authors are judged based on the tenets of the previous time period rather than their individual talents or contributions to literature as a whole. As a new movement begins, authors of the previous generation gain popularity and respect in literary circles while the new authors struggle to attain recognition for their works.

³ Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, 100, 8.

⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29.

⁵ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 37.

Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," in particular, helps the reader to understand and sympathize with the protagonist's psychological state in Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, and its emphasis on predecessors helps to establish the boundaries of the authorial community Pota, the novel's protagonist, envisions. While Pota mentions a variety of authors in comparison to himself, he focuses primarily on Modernist artists, his immediate predecessors chronologically. More specifically, Pota discusses his authorship in relation to Modernists recognized in the literary canon, such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and James Joyce. Because contemporary scholars and critics emphasize the importance of these particular authors so often in their writing, authors like Joseph Heller and Eugene Pota come to identify them as the figures with whom their writing contends. These are the figures to whom they will be compared when they publish their own works, and these are the figures who remain foremost in their minds as they write, hoping their texts will seem distinct enough from these forebears. Pota's vision of authorial community does not encompass contemporary writers like himself; those in the community are almost always firmly established members of the canon. Thus, the authorial community becomes synonymous with the canonical community for Pota.

Although Heller and his creation, Pota, suffer from the anxiety of Modernist influence in general, Heller references Joyce as a figure of particular concern for him. While Heller was only beginning his publishing career in the late 1950s, scholars were adopting Joyce's work into the literary canon and introducing him into the academic curriculum at universities worldwide.⁶ Joyce the writer assumes new significance in the literary world as the paragon of Modernist literature, a body of works characterized by immense formal experimentation and aesthetic creativity which reach the peak of the period mere decades before Heller's first full-length

⁶ Joseph Kelly, *Our Joyce: From Outcast to Icon*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 181.

publication.⁷ In several interviews, Heller himself identifies Joyce as one of his many influences particularly because certain characteristics of their widely different styles appear so similar, such as their use of fragmentation and interlocking narratives. Heller offers the example of *Catch-22* to address the connection between Joyce's works and his own. He attributes the choice to make Yossarian, the main character in *Catch-22*, an Assyrian rather than a Jew to his appreciation of Joyce's Leopold Bloom. "I got the idea, frankly, from James Joyce's placing Bloom in Dublin. I wanted somebody who would be *outside* the culture in every way – ethnically as well as others."⁸ In a different interview, Heller again draws a parallel between features of *Catch-22* and his predecessor's works, but he qualifies his admission, suggesting that the association is limited to specific moments in his writing and should not be overdetermined. "[The connection is] mainly mood. The walk through Rome [in *Catch-22*] had a Joycean coloration, a Dostoevskian content ... But they're circumstantial – they fit that particular section or page."⁹ Heller acknowledges Joyce as one potential influence on his writing, but, even in the early stages of his career, he looks for ways to defend the originality of his writing. A Joycean influence may surface in his writing occasionally, but Heller downplays the connection in an attempt to de-emphasize the legacy of the past in relation to his work.

In addition to such direct acknowledgement of Joyce's authorial influence, Heller frequently references Joyce in relation to his own theories of literary innovation and artistry. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Heller states that much of his writing emerged not "out of my

⁷ Most critics agree that Modernism, as a literary movement, is too complex and, thus, has no one discernible definition. My understanding of the Modernist aesthetic developed from several critical texts, including: Raymond Williams, "Modernism and the Metropolis," in *Literature and the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, Dennis Walder (ed), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, (New York: Harcourt, 1975).

⁸ Paul Krassner, "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller," in *Conversations with Joseph Heller*, Adam J. Sorkin (ed), (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 18.

⁹ Lawrence Grobel, "Joseph Heller: Competing with the Past," in *Endangered Species: Writers Talk about Their Craft, Their Visions, Their Lives*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 226.

own experiences as much as ...out of my experience of reading other people's work.'"¹⁰ Heller describes his initial encounters with Joyce's works from the confusion and frustration which arises from his fragmentary narrative structure to an appreciation of his meticulous, brilliantly balanced texts.¹¹ Thus, Heller frames his connection to Joyce as one bordering on a love/hate relationship between artist and student, father and son. Though the relationship produces fruitful associations and references at times, Heller is again careful not to overextend or overstate his reliance on Joyce for inspiration. "You can't avoid being conscious of comparisons," he says, later emphasizing the idea that competition with the past is far more prevalent and constant for him than any apprehension related to his contemporaries.¹²

Like many authors grappling with the looming figure of the past, Heller initially addresses his predecessors with a mocking, denigrating tone in his *Portrait*, attempting to confront their monolithic presence in the canon. W. Jackson Bate describes this process as one in which contemporary authors "pick holes" in their ancestors' work in order to create literature free from the haunting legacy of the past.¹³ Because Joyce becomes emblematic of the canonical community for Heller, this text seems rife with particularly spiteful comments about him. The allusion to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* in the title invokes the first of Heller's main criticisms of his formidable predecessor. From the very title, Heller positions his last novel as a reference to one of Joyce's most famous publications and as an opposition to the artistic ideology presented within that text.¹⁴ The image of an artist as young, energetic, and idealistic in the first few chapters of Joyce's *Portrait* masks what Heller views as the reality of artistic struggle and the

¹⁰ Charles Ruas, "Joseph Heller," in *Conversations with American Writers*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1984), 148.

¹¹ Krassner, "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller," 10.

¹² Grobel, "Joseph Heller: Competing with the Past," 226.

¹³ Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, 56.

¹⁴ Toward the end of the novel, Heller notes that his character's last name, Pota, is actually an acronym for *Portrait of the Artist*, a fact which also reaffirms this connection between Joyce's text and his own (*PA*, 229).

anxiety of authorship. In contrast, Heller presents his narrative of writing through the experiences of an eccentric old man, destined to look back on his failings rather than look forward to his opportunities. To Eugene Pota, every author, even the most promising ones, falls prey to the pitfalls of age, rendering them slaves to their ailing bodies rather than their blossoming art. For instance, Pota's physical need for "a second morning nap" immediately interrupts his mental desire to create art, representing a phenomenon still unknown to youthful artists (*PA*, 11). Pota details the utter banality of his work environment, his home, depicting himself as a decrepit, shuffling, wheezing figure in a cardigan sweater (*PA*, 11, 42). Through his constant rhetoric of old age, Heller strips the artist of his majesty and elitism and lumps him into a class of ordinary, fallible, pathetic human beings.

Pota's decelerating health and increasingly visible age keep the looming threat of death alive in his mind. Although Pota desperately wants to publish a masterpiece that will bolster his reputation as a great writer after his death, the likelihood of this occurrence dwindles as his story continues. At first, he reacts to this realization with an unfettered hostility toward those in the canon whose legacies as literary geniuses are widely accepted in both the public and academic spheres. While Joyce is not the only target of Pota's inward frustration and disillusion, his name is conjured up most frequently at the peak of Pota's cycle of depression. Initially, he expresses his disenchantment with Joyce through subtle jibes at the pretentiousness of Stephen Dedalus's language. "This book-length parody ... was definitely not going to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of the world, or his race, whichever" (*PA*, 10). Pota references one of the most famous passages from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* as another mode of addressing Joyce the artist, but he purposely misquotes the selection in order to downgrade Joyce's significance in relation to his particular work. Young Stephen's overly sentimental,

romanticized theories of art do not correlate with the elderly Pota's actual experience as a professional artist. Moreover, Joyce's language has not infiltrated Pota's artistic lexicon as the pinnacle of great writing; he identifies it as yet another subject for him to deride and ridicule.

When this tactic does not satisfy his desire for reprisal, he resorts to a more personal attack on Joyce as an author. During a guest lecture at an unnamed university in South Carolina, Pota, who in some ways acts as a stand-in for Heller, launches into a tirade on so-called literary tradition, entitled "The Literature of Despair" (PA, 162). As he rattles off a list of alcoholic, suicidal authors of generations gone by, he returns to Joyce's name, referring to him as "a heavy wine drinker with a falling-down-drunk-in-the-street capacity" (PA, 165). At the height of his frustration with and isolation from a broader society of his fellow authors, Pota cannot achieve personal redemption by devaluing Joyce's work. He has not achieved more recognition for his own work through a debasement of Joyce's *Portrait*, and his biting satire of Joyce's language has not fostered his readers' desire to reevaluate his writing. Because he cannot adequately soothe his authorial anxieties through an attack on Joyce the artist, Pota's verbal abuse turns to a ruthless disparagement of Joyce the person. By focusing on Joyce's indiscretions as a mortal being, Pota believes he can discredit the predominant legacy of Joyce as literary genius. If he can alter his audience's remembrance of Joyce, he can prove Joyce to be just as fallible as he is and, thus, equate himself with his predecessor.

Pota's attack on Joyce and the Modernists serves not only to defend the originality of his writing against his predecessors; it also spawns his personal anxiety and self-doubt about the quality of his work. After hundreds of years of literary experimentation have passed, Pota notes that few options are left to him for producing a unique form for his literature. As one option, he can blatantly revamp prior works with an alternate focus or style, potentially adding his signature

to the canon but also potentially entering the realm of plagiarism. To him, the line between imitation and plagiarism seems somewhat blurred, and he debates whether such an exploit would be an unethical or redeeming move for his career. "People seemed to have forgotten Faulkner's *The Bear*, and there was a thought. But let him try to imitate it and they'd sooner remember..." (PA, 47). Through this line of thinking, Pota reverts to a portrayal of the artist as a depleted thief, which destroys his potential for innovation from the start. Another option allows him to avoid anxiety over his personal inclusion in the canon by intentionally writing for a non-academic community, refuting the idea of immortalized texts through the more temporal arena of mass-market publishing. While he may mention the desire to create challenging texts, he voices his primary concern as the desire to publish a novel which would reel in money solely through its blockbuster status (PA, 108). His goal degrades the traditional loftiness of the literary canon and elevates his body of work by transferring them to the public's standards of literary worth.

Although *Portrait of an Artist* is not classified as an autobiographical text, Heller consciously and explicitly inserts himself into the narration to establish some useful connections between himself and his fictional character, Eugene Pota. Like Pota, Heller is also an outsider in the canonical community of authors. Instead of introducing his character through omniscient or first-person narration as most novels would, Heller makes an express intrusion into the story to name his newest protagonist. He writes, "His name was Eugene Pota, because that's what I want it to be..." (PA, 36). Heller calls attention to the fact that he controls the life and world of Eugene Pota, and every thought and action is first filtered through Heller before it is presented as Pota's. In describing Pota's life and past writings, Heller also implicitly references his own works, again begging the familiar reader selectively to link the two authors. From small details such as the mention of a catch-22 to more pronounced similarities like Pota's publications on his

childhood in Coney Island and his novel featuring King David, Heller utilizes autobiographical elements to draw attention to their similarities and, at the same time, highlight important distinctions between the two (*PA*, 39, 47, 89).¹⁵ For example, he can distance himself from criticisms of his own works by projecting them onto the fictional character, Pota. He can address his authorial weakness and exclusion from the canon more candidly through Pota precisely because Pota affords him the creative license to exaggerate, adapt, and explore aesthetic decisions reminiscent of his own works. The connection between Heller and his character implies that the reader should consider *Portrait of an Artist's* lessons about art and the artistic community in relation to Heller's career as well. However, the fictional format warns the reader against believing Heller to be the same pathetic, would-be-plagiarizer as Pota.

Heller's overt presence in the text also draws attention to the constructed nature of his writing. As with the great Modernist writers before him, Heller highlights the idea that the author controls both the form and content of a work and that formal elements shape the reader's perception of ingenuity as much as the subject matter or prose style. In a novel about the authorial process of writing, Heller emphasizes what the novel-in-progress looks like to its creator to further illustrate how the fragmentation of an idea frustrates and plagues the author. Heller portrays Pota's writings as if they were part of a personal notebook, filled with the scribbles and interjections of an artist developing his ideas. Pota drops one story vignette and picks up the thread of a new one when he encounters a roadblock, but this sudden transition from one narrative to another prevents Pota from ever bringing his ideas to fruition. Heller's visual representation of Pota's methods for writing serves to illustrate both the inception and deterioration of artistic ideas, or, more plainly, how the separate pieces of a work – the pre-writing notes, the initial brainstorming, the first words, the author's revisions – become a whole.

¹⁵ Heller published books on the same topics, titled *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here* and *God Knows*.

For instance, toward the middle of the novel, Heller includes a list of notes Pota had created for one of his developing ideas. Rather than discuss Pota's efforts to develop a single coherent idea for his book through seamless, carefully crafted narration, Heller chooses to interrupt his own text to insert fragmented character sketches and chapter outlines, establishing a visual testament to the complex process of writing an extended work of fiction (PA, 74-77).¹⁶

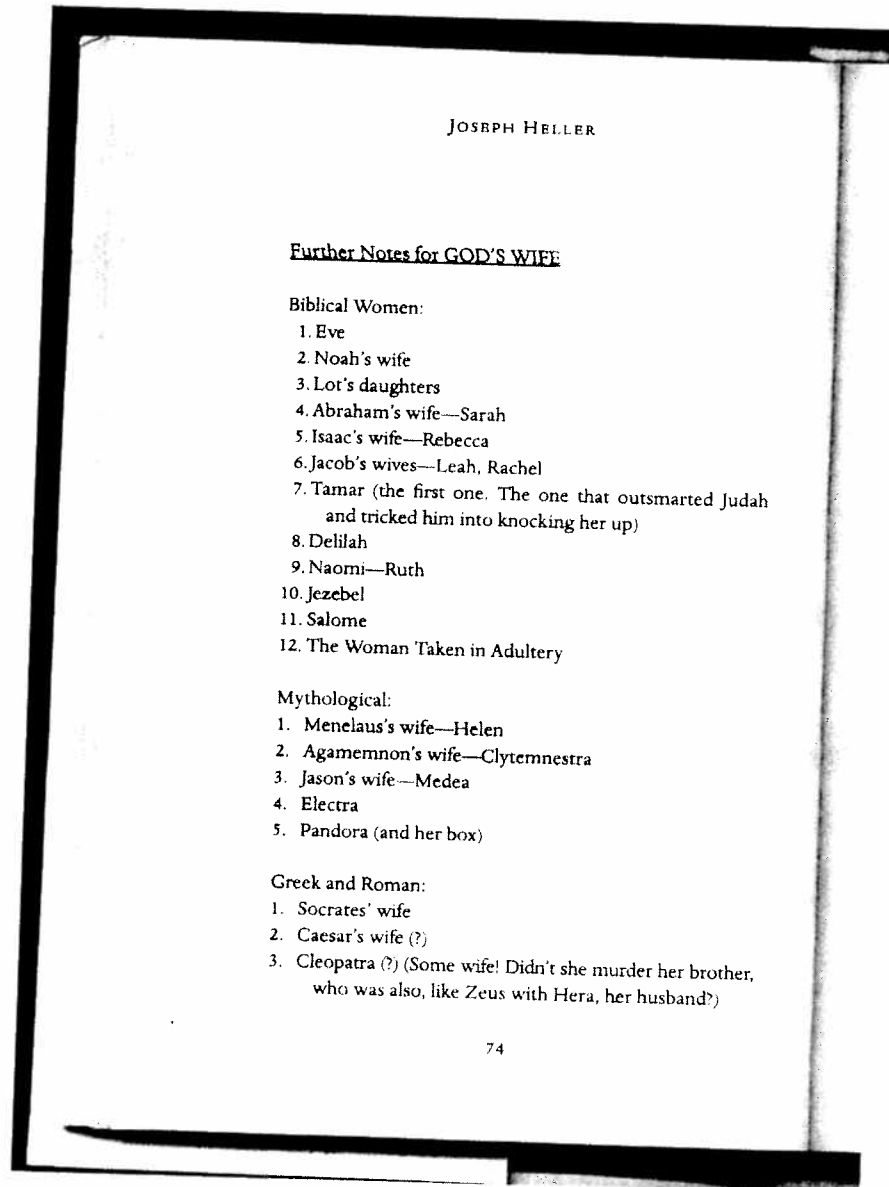


Figure 1. Example of Eugene Pota's prewriting character sketches in *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*

¹⁶ See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for more detail.

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JOSEPH HELLER

Chapters: Notes

1. Sarah, narrating—She is horrified when she hears of it, is furious with Abraham, and unable to see it as he does.

2. Abraham, narrating—His staunch belief that it is God who talks to him in dreams or when the deep slumber comes over him.

3. Rebecca, narrating, all narrate in the first person—Rebecca is sent for from Haran to marry Isaac. To Isaac, when she finally is with him the first time—do not forget to put in: "My God, what happened to you?" Rebecca had come from far away and had never seen a circumcised male member before.

4. Jacob—Esau. "Put yourself in my place"—about taking Esau's place to receive the blessing from his blind father. "When I did, Esau wanted to kill me, and I had to run away. And that's how I met Rachel."

5. Rachel—Leah. "In the dark they are all the same." Leah takes her sister's place in the wedding bed, and Jacob, made drunk, doesn't discover the switch until morning.

6. Esau. "Believe it or not." "Believe it or not, I looked forward to seeing Jacob again and embracing him as my brother, and he was afraid I was still angry enough to kill him."

Figure 2. Example of Eugene Pota's prewriting notes in *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*

Portrait of an Artist is not the first of Heller's books to make reference to criticisms of his prior works, but it is the first work in which he directly engages in an extended discussion of such critiques. Though several of his books were ranked on bestsellers listss, his writing often received mixed reviews after publication. For example, one reviewer prefaces his negative

comments with praise for Heller's tone and empathetic characters before critiquing its "length and relative shapelessness."¹⁷ Others comment on his repetitive style of narration and, as one reviewer put it, his tendency "never to explain [the plot of his novels] but to let descriptions suffice."¹⁸ The frequent references in Heller's *Portrait* unequivocally state his awareness of his reception in relation to both his readers and reviewers, yet they also imply Heller's refusal to take such comments to heart. Instead, he makes a joke of them to suggest that the reasoning behind his flawed writing style is more complex than he is given credit for. In the first few pages, Pota briefly contemplates reusing "a bit" from a previous novel but quickly dismisses the idea because that sort of literary recycling has never been his aim. "No one might catch the repetition. But *he* would know, and that single cheat could be enough to engender self-contempt..." (PA, 10). Repetition of both words and ideas remains the most prominent area of discussion with critics and scholars of Heller's work; this statement responds to these charges, asking the reader to reconsider his motives for repetitive writing. Through Pota's thoughts, Heller intimates that his own desire was not to shirk his creative responsibilities as an artist but to develop a new level of complexity in his writing.

Pota and Heller, to some extent, acknowledge criticisms of their work, but Pota makes several attempts to defend his various stylistic choices in his body of work and the perceived lack of ingenuity in his later writings. Pota's first novel won him critical acclaim, but thereafter, none of his works seemed to be quite so celebrated or widely read, paralleling Heller's experience after the publication of *Catch-22*.¹⁹ In particular, his most recent publication garnered reviews

¹⁷ William H. Pritchard, "Yossarian Redux," *The New York Times* (25 September 1994), Electronic, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

¹⁸ Joseph Epstein, "Joseph Heller's Milk Train: Nothing More to Express," *The Washington Post*, (6 October 1974), Proquest, University of Michigan Library, 3/11/06.

¹⁹ In his review of *Closing Time*, William Pritchard validates this concern, saying, "Joseph Heller's fate was to have his four successor novels invariably compared, usually unfavorably, to their mighty predecessor [*Catch-22*]." Pritchard, "Yossarian Redux."

that were “unanimously respectful, which was disappointing,” and his editor shoots down each new idea, claiming that he might have considered the storyline “if it came to [him] from a new writer, especially a young one” (*PA*, 37, 86). The editor implies Pota’s ideas seem both too experimental and too lackluster coming from an author with his years of experience. While Pota has grown accustomed to literary criticisms of his work, *Portrait of an Artist* focuses more on the effect of criticisms from more personal sources. To Pota, expressions of doubt from his favorite editor, Paul, and his wife, Polly, warrant response, which he provides in his final lecture, “The Literature of Despair.”

Throughout the novel, he references the idea that his failure to write one last masterpiece – or, at least, one last respectable work – falls in line with the trend of aging authors. Heller writes:

“The preliminary groundwork for the lecture he had contracted to give on the very sad endings to the lives of so many famous authors had introduced to him the disheartening number of late, lesser, smaller, weaker works that had shaped in a downward curve the accomplishments at the close of their celebrated careers” (*PA*, 45).

Pota fears that his career has not been as celebrated as he might have liked, so his association with figures of great status in the literary canon provides him with even more reason to believe his final ventures are destined to fail. During his lecture, Pota runs through what he refers to as the “roll call” of writers who fall into this category of authorial despair, illustrating that his failure is not as singular or depressing as he once thought; rather, he begins to view his association to such highly regarded writers – like Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway – as a sign that he has gained access to a very select, elite club (*PA*, 164-166). In

the middle of his presentation, Pota goes off script as he comes to the realization that evidence of depression and decline position his situation in a similar vein to every major author he names.

With this defense, he is no longer struggling to define himself in contrast to the throng of seemingly more successful authors from the past; he is merely engaging with “the nature of the occupation itself” (PA, 169). Through his repudiation of the canonical community, Pota discovers the flexibility of that community’s boundaries. Though he may not merit association with these writers in some way, he learns to redefine the parameters of their community to include his own experience among theirs.

As Pota strays further from his preconceived, written speech, he begins to dialogue with his own inner thoughts, pontificating on a writer’s real ambitions and expectations for their careers as publishers. He interrupts his train of thoughts several times to alter his use of pronouns, eradicating the distance between the subject of his lecture and himself through his “they – we” construction (PA, 172). For example, Pota says, “...what did they – we – hope to obtain when they – we – first hoped to succeed as a writer?” (PA, 172). His revision of “they” to “we” at this point in his argument allies him with a broad range of despondent authors, lamenting their initial goals and that which they were not able to achieve as writers. Although Pota begins his sentence with plural subjects, he ends the sentence with the singular “writer,” emphasizing that two distinct entities have actually merged to be one and the same.

Moreover, “they – we” implies that the distinction between subject and speaker is deteriorating more literally here, and the author becomes directly included in the discussion of authorship at hand. Thus, Pota associates himself with the group of authors mentioned in his speech, and through a similar move, Heller again connects his experiences to Pota without actually claiming them as his own. Pota’s reference to the plural first-person pronoun

reintroduces the idea that he is partially an embodiment of two distinct people: Eugene Pota, a fictional character, and Joseph Heller, his creator. This connection to Heller invites the reader to consider Pota's private thoughts and public speeches as extensions of some of Heller's thoughts and reflections on his personal writing career. Through Pota and this redefinition of community, Heller discovers a voice that will defend his own choices as an author and encourage his readers to reevaluate his body of works for its stylistic aesthetic.

This redefinition of community requires a reevaluation of the author's work in order for him to truly justify his newfound insider status. Both Heller and Pota cannot just address criticisms of their work; they must reshape past perceptions of their work into their more favorable aspects. For instance, the stylistic development of *Portrait of an Artist* serves as an example of the meticulous planning Heller weaves into his texts. Heller begins his novel with the opening passage in Pota's capricious novel, *Tom*, the real story of Tom Sawyer. Pota then cycles through a myriad of underdeveloped ideas, including a sexual biography that is not a biography and a novel starring a human gene, all the while ruminating on the process of writing and popularization. Sawyer returns to his mind, however, at several significant moments in the text. When Pota's feelings of authorial crisis hit one of their many peaks, he uses his unfinished Sawyer novel as the medium through which he will voice the idealism and desolation inherent in the world of professional publishing. Though each narrative fragment from Pota's extensive collection of works-in-progress appears haphazardly placed within the framework of Heller's larger novel, these narratives thread together in the course of the text to formulate broader themes of failure and obsession. The fragmentary story of Tom Sawyer acts as a marker in the text to refocus the reader's attention on Heller's main themes after long periods of Pota's inner

monologues. Heller motions toward an understanding of his methods as somewhat unconventional but crafted all the same.

Furthermore, Pota begins to defend his work against the criticism of textual banality frequently levied against him. Paul, the editor, compares Pota's budding ideas to strikingly similar subjects discussed in previously published works. With each idea he pitches, Pota is either regurgitating his or his influences' past writings. His fixation on the most commendable, inventive books of his predecessors encourages his fantasies about writing their sequels or adapting their plot structure. However, as Pota becomes more involved in the discussion of his books' negative criticisms, he learns to voice the positive attributes of his works in addition to the flaws. Pota implies that the subject matter of his previous books had been his means of inspiration for the aesthetic experiments he conducted through his literature. As he prattles on about his hopes for his last novel, he describes his pending book as "experimental, perhaps, but no novelties or trickery, absolutely not" (PA, 45). The author notes that he may have little new to contribute to the content of modern literature, but he still believes in his ability to alter the process of writing literature through a focus on unexplored styles. In many ways, *Portrait of an Artist* becomes his prime example of this phenomenon. The study of the artist at work has been reproduced in literature for decades before Pota, a soon-to-be author of a portrait, or Heller, the actual author of the *Portrait*, had started their publishing careers. Yet, the distinguishing mark of Heller's last book is not the language or narrative; his presentation of the narrative holds the key to its most intriguing facets. Heller includes Pota's many attempts at detailed notetaking and outlining. He breaks down the barrier between author and subject by merging the frustrated responses of character and creator. Through his reliance on aesthetic experimentation, Pota can defend both his successes and his failures under the guise of mere stylistic playfulness.

For Pota, one of his most plaguing anxieties remains his relationship to the past. Modernist authors, like James Joyce or T.S. Eliot, have been renowned for their skillful fusion of ancient literary traditions and contemporary subjects. Their use of the past did not merely recreate their ancestors' work, but recreated familiar stories and styles in a form that had not been produced before.²⁰ Eugene Pota, on the other hand, confronts his own internal questioning of his novels, asking himself whether he has been so creative in his career that he can manipulate past publications to make them new again, as Joyce did, or whether he has been so depleted that he can *only* rewrite the past in the exact same vein as those who came before. Each time Pota pitches a new idea to his editor, an idea which he has nurtured and refined for many days before their meeting, Paul nonchalantly reminds him that a bevy of writers, including Pota himself, have published such novels many times before, implying that Pota's mode of thought has grown trite and wholly uncreative. In one meeting, he degrades Pota's stylistic choices, saying, "'And here's another thing you might not like. If you plan to develop the book with first-person accounts in chapters by different characters, you've already got me thinking about William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*'" (PA, 89). The editor's abrasive warning reinforces Pota's fear that he has become a sham artist, an artificer who has only the power to imitate, not create.

Pota's editor surfaces in the text at the precise moments when the idealism of the writer threatens to consume the narrative tone. Paul represents the voice of reason in the text to counter the overly romantic image of the author as creator. Through his conversations with Pota, Paul stresses the idea that writing is a business venture in addition to a creative act, and an author's originality bears strong ties to his market potential in addition to his psychological well-being. Paul's presence in the novel helps to develop one of the stark contrasts between Heller's *Portrait*

²⁰ For example, many early reviews of Joyce's work reference his skillful handling of *The Odyssey* in relation to his own modern Dublin culture. See Robert Deming (ed), *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970) for more detail.

of an Artist and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*. For much of Joyce's novel, his character, the young Stephen Dedalus, pontificates on the ideological meaning and value of art as he expands his understanding of the craft. Through his personal experiences, Stephen negotiates the distinctions and boundaries between art and life. Heller, on the other hand, collapses these boundaries through the figure of the editor, illustrating that real world issues such as economics and politics have a profound impact on one's ability to produce their art. The editor also demonstrates that the anxiety of influence is not solely a psychological problem, as some theorists may suggest. Rather, it develops from a combination of internal fear and external pressure. Whenever Pota manages to divest himself from his comparisons to Joyce, Paul assumes the role of the haunting figure in his life, the man who relentlessly judges his work and questions his ability to continue producing quality work.

While the anxiety of influence bears mostly negative connotations, theorists argue that the anxiety also produces redemptive associations between the artist as student and the artist as mentor. Eliot reminds the reader, "We endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed ... but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."²¹ The author cannot be separated from the past because the past is so integral in shaping contemporary artistic thought, but if the author chooses to work with rather than against the past, he has more potential to create truly laudable art. Bate further argues that the process of destabilizing the past does not actually solve the problem of authorial identity for the contemporary author; when he reaches the point where he is free to express his craft without comparison to his predecessors, he "shrinks at [his writing's] new nakedness."²² Though Heller does engage in this process to some extent, he provides one

²¹ Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 38.

²² Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, 56.

example of an author who does not shrink from his own creative prowess. Rather, just as Eliot suggests, he uses his relationship to the past as a method of reconfiguring or rethinking of past artistic techniques.

Thus, the improvised moment of association in Pota's lecture encompasses his intense frustration with his Modernist predecessors, but more importantly, it is the point where Pota learns to reevaluate his relationship to past authors as one that is more often characterized by respect, admiration, and belonging. Pota realizes he often parodies Joyce and the other Modernists in his more recent writings, but as Frederic Jameson would argue, his purpose is not to mock or deride his predecessor.²³ Rather, he uses the audience's knowledge of Joyce to invoke stylistic references in his own texts; he pays homage to his predecessors by acknowledging their significance in his mind and their impact on the formation of his work. Jameson suggests that artists like Joseph Heller and Eugene Pota "no longer 'quote' such 'texts' as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them..."²⁴ Hence, Pota's focus on Joyce does not have to be read purely in relation to the haunted psyche of the writer. His references to Joyce also serve as a validating connection to a long tradition of literature and provide a way for contemporary authors to partially divest themselves from the anxiety of influence. Through these references, Pota reaffirms that his writings will always include allusions to past writers and a "pastiche," or innocuous imitation, of their styles.²⁵ However, his frequent use of mimicry and repetition also implies that such pastiche is, in itself, a progressive new form of writing which should be considered for its innovative approach to the process of writing more so than its specific distinction from one historical style or another.

²³ Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, (London: Verso, 1998), 5.

²⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 2.

²⁵ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 5.

Because writers like James Joyce paved the way for extreme literary experimentation, Heller's obsessive, repetitive method of narration appears to be less of a distracting quirk and more of a meaningful artistic decision. Heller's texts often stretch over four hundred pages or more though the narrative focuses on only one issue, which continues to surface without resolution throughout the story. For many critics, Heller's repetitiveness throws his originality into question. Although he has written other bestselling books, Heller seems obsessed with the selling power of his most famous, *Catch-22*. In addition to the publication of the novel's sequel almost thirty years after the original, Heller produced at least three short stories, one play, and countless interviews revisiting his first, and most successful, work. In his *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, Heller satirizes his own tendency to create and recreate endlessly through the character of Eugene Pota, a writer who, like Heller, is nearing the end of his life and wants to write one last masterpiece to sustain his memory after he is gone. However, Pota's ideas always seem reminiscent of his previous works; he becomes fixated on certain characters and themes, and these subtle revisions of past ideas are his only sources for inspiration and motivation. Pota's editor criticizes his potential self-plagiarism, but Pota staunchly defends the creative potential of such ideas.

Though Pota's need to rewrite and rethink past ideas seems to overshadow the main subject in *Portrait of an Artist*, the book highlights the argument that this kind of compulsory revision is not specific to Pota alone. It boasts a long history with several critically acclaimed, canonical authors as well. Though James Joyce is not the only example, he is perhaps the most directly referenced in Heller's *Portrait*. Both *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are, in some respects, autobiographical. However, they also contain embellishments and strategic rethinking of events, personalities, and themes in order to represent the most desirable,

precise identity for Joyce's characters. Through his constant revisions, Joyce demonstrates his mastery of authorial control in his texts.²⁶ His *Portrait* itself can be viewed as a reinvention of a reinvention of self – a kind of cyclical, repetitive tinkering which transforms the real world of James Joyce into the fictional realm of Stephen Dedalus. In light of Joyce's success with this method, Heller's re-writing can also be considered a tireless search for genius or masterpiece rather than becoming the trademark of yet another hack writer. Through Pota, Heller articulates the compulsion to achieve literary perfection before death, even if that means rewriting dozens of first novels. Because Pota's ideas are constantly growing and reforming, his various unfinished chapters emphasize the process of the artistic mind rather than the product. Harold Bloom describes the value of this process, claiming that writing "is thus both a contraction and expansion; for all the ratios of revision are contracting movements, yet making is an expansive one."²⁷ Pota may obsessively return to the same idea, constantly revising and rethinking his content in search of the perfect text, but each return marks an improvement in his writing. Whether he is revising someone else's ideas or his own, he is always adding to his conception of literature. Heller's invocation of Joyce's textual legacy serves as a useful way of redefining himself in relation to the past; he pushes the idea of the identity and invention forward based on the achievements of his predecessors.

Pota's lecture does not help situate him in the canon. It does not reverse the criticisms levied against his past writings. It does not change his identity as an author. Yet, "The Literature of Despair" marks a distinctly positive shift in the author's perception of his craft. Through this lecture, Pota begins to separate the authorial community from one's place in the canon or on the bestsellers list. Rather, for Pota, the authorial community becomes a society of

²⁶ Note that Joyce never personally published *Stephen Hero*, but the text still demonstrates his efforts to continually revise his texts.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 95.

authors who have experienced the nagging self-doubt, the bitter depression, and plaguing anxieties of past influence that accompany the process of writing. By learning to redefine himself as an insider of this authorial community, Pota discovers a way to reevaluate his own body of work free from such daunting, direct comparison to his ancestors.

Chapter 2:

The Act of "Turning": Addressing the Jewish Community in *Good as Gold* and *God Knows*

"T'shuva, turning, is central to the Jewish conception of human life and to contemporary American-Jewish fiction. The idea of turning ... to the right path is connected with the Jewish conception of human redemption..."

-- Bonnie K. Lyons

Just as the community of canonical authors plagues Heller's literary thoughts, the community of Jewish American authorship seems too arbitrary and exclusionary for Heller. In his early years as a writer, Heller avoided using Jewish characters in his text because he questioned the extent of his own cultural knowledge and his own relationship to the broader Jewish community, wondering whether his experience fit within the understood boundaries of the group. According to Judith Ruderman, Heller's novel *Good as Gold* acts as his first literary identification as a Jewish author because, in the past, he had preferred "to think that he was not Jewish" (*JH*, 154). Although Ruderman is correct in asserting Heller's act of affirmation in *Good as Gold*, she overlooks the particular significance of this act. Heller's later writings seek neither to deny nor affirm Jewish Identity any more so than his first.¹ Rather, through his later writings, Heller learns to downplay the impersonal, communal understanding of ethnicity and redefine it in ways that will allow him to widen the boundaries of the Jewish Identity. Heller engages in a literary *t'shuva*,² transforming himself from an outsider of the Jewish community to an insider through the narratives of *Good as Gold* and *God Knows*.

Categorically, the Jewish Identity has always been somewhat elusive for both critics and community members. Outsiders of the group have defined the Jewish people in terms of their

¹ The term Jewish Identity refers to a shared sense of belonging within the broad Jewish community. In contrast, the term Jewish identity refers to an individual's conception of his/her personal identity.

² Bonnie Lyons references the idea of *t'shuva*, which she defines as an act of "turning," as an important theme in many Jewish American works of fiction. Bonnie Lyons, "American-Jewish Fiction Since 1945," in *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources*, Lewis Fried (ed). (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 69.

race, religion, culture, and ethnicity throughout modern history, but these categorizations always fail to be all-inclusive markers of Jewishness in such a diverse body of people. Likewise, Jewish literature now occupies a space in the literary canon and academia, but scholars still debate the specific features that differentiate “Jewish literature” from any other classification. Hana Wirth-Nesher, for instance, argues Jewish literature stems from a multitude of languages, nationalities, and religious beliefs.³ It is not merely the literature of Jewish authors or literature focused on Jewish themes. As contemporary works demonstrate, the field is more far-reaching than that.⁴ However, the term “Jewish literature” has infiltrated academic language to such an extent that it is almost impossible for ethnically identifiable authors to escape the label. Cynthia Ozick’s article on Jewish American literature illustrates the paradoxical quality of modern language: Jewish authors may not be striving toward what Ozick calls “*Jewish* accomplishments,” but many critics will forever judge these writers based solely on such ethnocentric expectations.⁵

Werner Sollors furthers the discussion on ethnocentric writing in several of his books, including *The Invention of Ethnicity*, in which he explicates the difficulty involved in producing and analyzing ethnic literature precisely because the definitions of individual ethnicities are so fluid and constructed. As Sollors posits, cultural practices and communities are fictions in their own right. People within these communities long for a way to establish an “ethnic homogeneity or racial purity” that will authoritatively determine who belongs in the culture and who is an

³ Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Defining the Indefinable: What is Jewish Literature?” in *What is Jewish Literature?* Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed), (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 3-4.

⁴ Wirth-Nesher offers examples of Jewish themed texts written by non-Jewish authors, Hebrew texts written by non-Jews, and Jewish authors who avoid discussing Jewishness in their texts as only a few examples of the discrepancy within the category. Wirth-Nesher, “Defining the Indefinable,” 3.

⁵ Ozick uses the italics to differentiate between the accomplishments of an individual Jewish person and the way in which the collective subsumes those accomplishments as representative of the whole. *Jewish*, as opposed to Jewish, then denotes a belonging to the whole. Cynthia Ozick, “America: Toward Yavneh,” in *What is Jewish Literature?* Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed), (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 21.

imposter, an outsider.⁶ Sollors argues, "Ethnic groups are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units. They seem to be always already in existence."⁷ Like Wirth-Nesher, Sollors contends the boundaries of any cultural group cannot be defined concretely; such boundaries are often based on a widespread adoption of shared values and cultural beliefs like religion or familial practices, which may not translate exactly the same for each member of the group.⁸ Thus, boundaries cannot hope to definitively encapsulate all of the varied identities which may belong to a particular group. The language of boundaries and differentiation may appear to create an understanding of community, but the community itself remains too complex for such ideological definition. Through his texts, Sollors illustrates the constructed nature of ethnic categorization, proving such categorization to be an invention rather than indisputable fact.⁹ Because ethnicity often relies on definitions of what it is not more so than what it is, ethnic boundaries also focus on the language of exclusion rather than inclusion.¹⁰

In light of these theoretical discussions on the problems associated with ethnic identification, readers can better understand Heller's reluctance to identify with the Jewish Identity in his texts. For instance, his autobiography offers insight into his personal interaction with Jewish culture, interactions which do not fit neatly inside the boundaries of the Jewish community. *Now and Then* details Heller's early life growing up in a largely Jewish sector of Coney Island, but it emphasizes that his childhood experiences did not inculcate a sense of a broad-reaching, communal Jewishness in him. Though Heller's family followed religious

⁶ Werner Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xii.

⁷ Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," xiii-xiv.

⁸ Frederik Barth, a social anthropologist, offers this idea as part of an assumed definition of ethnic boundaries. Frederik Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969)," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, Werner Sollors (ed), (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 296.

⁹ Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," xiv-xv.

¹⁰ Sollors references this in relation to the idea of dissociation. Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," xv.

custom for special circumstances such as weddings or deaths in the family, he does not emphasize the role of religion in these early years. He explains that his mother was not a particularly observant follower of Judaism and insinuates that God did not play a pivotal role in his life either. He writes, "And it is insulting to God, I suspect, to imagine He cares whether I pray to Him or even knows where or who I am" (*NT*, 150). Hence, Heller is not united with the broader Jewish community based on his religious affiliation. As a child, he attended school and played with children from the Italian and Irish sectors of Coney Island in addition to his own Jewish neighborhood, and he even admits to the many infatuations he had with the girls in his school, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds (*NT*, 94). The idea of maintaining biologically pure group boundaries did not infiltrate his thoughts.¹¹ Though Heller references a few instances of anti-Semitism in his youth and identified himself as Jewish at times, this account of his life suggests he identified far more as a Coney Island Jewish American than as an American Jew.

Like many an American youth in the 1930s, Heller did not feel a strong connection with the world's Jewish community because his distance from the degenerating situation in Germany hindered his understanding of its meaning. Heller describes his reaction to newspaper headlines on the day Hitler became chancellor of Germany under President Hindenburg. "[The newspapers] knew they would sell every copy that day, whereas I didn't know who Hindenburg was. Until much later, I thought he was a zeppelin"¹² (*NT*, 11). In a way, Heller was sheltered from one of the most common bonds between Jewish people across the globe. Amid the amusements of his Coney Island community, the beginning of World War II bore some significance in his young-adult life just the same as it did for the rest of his American friends, he notes (*NT*, 90). However, Heller does not mention the Holocaust or the horrors of anti-Semitism

¹¹ Barth notes "self-perpetuating" biological boundaries as another common definition of a group. Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969)," 296.

¹² Earlier in this paragraph, Heller also says he did not understand who Hitler was or what he was capable of.

as factors impacting his developing world view. Rather, Heller cites the bombing of Pearl Harbor as one of his prime reasons for joining the armed services, aligning himself with the majority of mainstream Americans more specifically than the Jewish community (*NT*, 99). As with his cultural interactions at home, Heller's relationship to World War II and the Holocaust complicates his categorization as a Jewish American author. Because he cannot be easily situated within the conventional confines of the Jewish community, Heller needs to either dissociate from the Jewish Identity or produce a new definition of Jewishness into which he can assimilate.

In retrospect, Heller acknowledged that the absence of Jewish characters in his initial publications was not accidental or coincidental; he made a conscious choice to avoid Jewish identification in the texts prior to *Good as Gold*. Shortly after the publication of *God Knows*, Heller's second overtly ethnocentric novel, Heller participated in an interview where he directly referenced his tendency to evade Jewish identification in his early texts. He said:

"A decision I did make with *Something Happened* [Heller's second novel] was that [the main character] not be Jewish, yet I was aware that in his ruminations he could very easily have been Jewish. Had I made him Jewish, he would have had to dwell an enormous amount of time on the sense of his own Jewishness and to what extent that affected his marriage and his job, and I didn't want it to be a book about that."¹³

For Heller, the mere mention of a character's Jewish ethnicity would usurp the central theme of his texts and distract from his intended focus. The appearance of Jewishness in a post-World War II text bears too much significance to be discussed in passing; it necessitates an in-depth analysis of the way one's Jewishness has affected all other facets of life, including, as Heller

¹³ Ruas, "Joseph Heller," 157-158.

suggests, personal relationships with family and friends, interactions with cultural outsiders in the working world, and introspective explorations of the self in relation to a communal Jewish heritage. On several occasions, Heller remarked that he had never felt as though he had any claim to authority on the subject of a collective Jewish experience, so the inclusion of these Jewish themes seems, understandably, somewhat daunting for him.¹⁴ By avoiding this Jewish connection in his early texts, Heller temporarily evades the problem of his personal Jewish identification and focuses on the development of his particular brand of storytelling.

As Werner Sollors implies, ethnicities are most easily defined in terms of what they are not rather than what they are, but this method of negation also poses problems for authors like Joseph Heller. The "this-is-not-that" mentality produces binaristic oppositions and categories to which Heller cannot fully belong. As a non-practicing Jew, he is neither Jewish nor Gentile in relation to religion. He is neither Jewish nor American; he is Jewish American. Because definitions of ethnicities do not typically make room for these kinds of fusions, the boundaries of Jewish culture always appear exclusionary to Heller and his characters. While the language of differentiation has the ability to create a sense of a special, elite class of people, it can also produce a feeling of Otherness, a sense that one is always on the outside of the broader culture. Kim Worthington expounds on this point, arguing, "...because knowledge of oneself is always mediated by the terms of social discourse, self-perception is always corrupted or defiled by the language of others, or the language of oneself as another."¹⁵ Heller's hesitancy to foreground his Jewish heritage may result from this anxiety of Otherness; allying oneself with the tradition of Jewish literature means one's work must be judged separately from mainstream culture. Thus,

¹⁴ Heller made statements like this in reference to the idea that he did not grow up in a traditional Jewish household and did not often think of himself as much different from his Italian or Irish schoolmates, an idea which he discusses at length in his autobiography *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*.

¹⁵ Kim Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 162.

Heller's initial impulse is to focus his writing on American characters rather than tackle the ambiguous category of Jewish American literature. Yet, through the process of writing his "Jewish experience," Heller adopts a more effectual strategy for confronting his concerns with the Jewish Identity. By engaging in artistic "play," as Worthington calls it, Heller discovers a way in which the boundaries of Jewish culture "can be altered, revised, and invented" as he sees fit.¹⁶ Heller's personal history may not provide him with full membership in the conventional Jewish community, but through a sort of literary rebellion, he proves he can redefine the Jewish community to suit individual characters as well as the collective.

While *Good as Gold* is Heller's first novel explicitly focused on a Jewish protagonist and Jewish themes, it is also his first experiment in debasing the conventional classification of people belonging to the Jewish community. Though he acknowledges his audience's expectation that he should create Jewish characters in addition to the more famous Gentile ones, he does not find it fruitful to create particularly laudable, or even likeable, Jewish protagonists.¹⁷ For instance, *Good as Gold* follows the story of a man who renounces his Jewish heritage just so he can ingratiate himself with a slew of rich, racist politicians in Washington. Gold does not champion his ethnic identity, he does not triumph over his antagonists' anti-Semitic credo, and he does not engage in a deep, meaningful relationship with his heritage through this narrative. As Melvin Friedman argues, "Put simply, *Good as Gold* ... casts a knowing and exaggerated glance at a vast body of Jewish American fiction; it successfully caricatures many of the recipes offered by Jewish writers of the past two decades."¹⁸ From the outset, *Gold* presents one of the most despicable, tightfisted, stereotypical Jewish characters in literature. In response to the pressure to

¹⁶ Worthington, *Self as Narrative*, 95.

¹⁷ At one of his book readings, an audience member specifically asked why he did not create any Jewish protagonists. This event is discussed in more detail in chapter three.

¹⁸ Melvin J. Friedman, "Something Jewish Happened: Some Thoughts about Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold*," in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, James Nagel (ed), (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984), 197.

create a Jewish protagonist, Heller offers his audience Gold, but in doing so, he refutes the expectation that he should create a favorable, authentic portrayal of the Jewish Identity.

Similarly, Heller's 1984 publication, *God Knows*, desecrates the figure of King David, one of the most revered figures of the Jewish religion, through its emphasis on David's weakness and sexual ineptitude.¹⁹ From the outset, *God Knows* functions as a retelling of David's story in the Old Testament. On his deathbed, David reveals the truth behind the fortuitous events which granted him access to the throne and the fearful tactics that kept him in power despite several attempts on his life. For instance, Judith Ruderman cites the circumstances surrounding David's marriage to Bathsheba, Abigail, and Michal as evidence of his unusual abuse of power; each marriage succeeded the occurrence of a suspicious death, usually that of the woman's former husband (*JH*, 112). In his heyday, David had the cunning to gain Saul's favor, putting himself in line for the throne, and the command to commandeer any woman or favor he wanted. However, from the opening pages of the novel, Heller portrays David at the end of his life as a flaccid, vulnerable, faded ruler, left with only a dream that his favorite wife, Bathsheba, will have mercy and sleep with him once more before he dies. "Bathsheba could still warm me, bring heat to my veins with a healing rush of blood. Bathsheba could excite me most easily if she wished to, but she doesn't believe so and doesn't want to" (*GK*, 58). David is an invalid, confined to his bed where he must rely on his young child-servant to take care of him as though he were an infant, including bathing, feeding, and consoling him. He is impotent and derides himself for his inability to sustain sexual excitement even though his young servant, Abishag the Shunammite, dresses herself in perfumes for his pleasure each night. And, worst of all, David is a phony,

¹⁹ According to biblical stories, God chose David to be the king of Israel, and the Jewish religion claims the next Messiah will be a descendant of David because God decreed it. Israel is sometimes referred to as the "City of David" in honor of his story. Louis Jacobs, *Oxford Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.

whose triumphant defeat of Goliath attests to his sheer luck more so than his unwavering courage or unmatched astuteness. As Ruderman points out, Heller's account reflects only his interpretation of David's life, which accentuates the author's humorous writing style and signature sarcasm, but his choice of subject matter also highlights the constructed nature inherent in such biblical tales (*JH*, 110).

Heller's text ostensibly argues that Jewish culture thrived under the reign of King David primarily as a result of several inadvertent events, depreciating the history of one of the world's most recognized religious groups. David claims God chose him as the leader of the Jewish people, but Heller's interpretation suggests his reign rose from a series of fortunate mishaps during his youth. For example, David was allowed entry into King Saul's army after slaying the giant Goliath, but Goliath only died because David missed his mark. His stone hit Goliath's skull, causing almost immediate death, though David intended to attack him first in the teeth (*GK*, 92). He describes the scene thusly:

"I felt my shot unroll with the sling and fly from the pocket without the slightest waver, and I knew in my bones that there really was no way I could possibly miss. I missed. I caught him in the forehead instead, above the left eye. Blood gushed out yards in front of him for the second or two he remained standing. Then he dropped like a boulder. ...There was not even a twitch. My joy was immense" (*GK*, 92).

Heller's sarcasm highlights David's youthful cocky airs and history of lucky breaks, pitting the happenstance nature of David's rise to power against his arrogant claim to his mortal superiority. In a subsequent introspection, David believes he became king primarily because Jonathan, Saul's son, died after warning David that Saul was plotting to kill him. Even during David's reign, the

unintended consequences of his actions produced unintended consequences for the history of the Jewish people. After years of refusing Bathsheba's request, David names Solomon to be his successor in a moment of sheer spite for his first-born rather than his faith in Solomon's abilities (*GK*, 393). By undermining the noble, sacred narrative of the Jewish religion, Heller displaces the need to identify with specific religious values in order to be considered a member of the Jewish community. Heller argues that religious practice and biblical stories can be just as invented and arbitrary as most markers of Jewish Identity.

To complement the feeble, dependent male stereotype, Heller launches his attack on the female counterpart through his portrayal of David's wives. From his first wife to his last, all but one of these women reveal themselves as the embodiment of both the Jewish American Princess stereotype and the overly protective, overbearing mother figure.²⁰ As the young, inexperienced David professes his love to his first wife, Michal chastises him for daring to address her as anything but "Your Highness." David, aghast at her brazenness and conceit, reflects, "Michal, my bride, was not just the daughter of a king but a bona-fide Jewish American Princess! I had married a JAP! I am the first in the Old Testament to be stuck with one" (*GK*, 165). Likewise, David's unflattering depictions of Bathsheba's personality suggest she too falls into David's categorization of the JAP stereotype. Though he is madly in love with her, he depicts her most characteristically as a woman whose privileged social position ensured that she would never "put her hands into dishwater if there were any way to avoid it..." (*GK*, 20). She uses her connection to the king to flaunt her power and influence, but aside from her occasional scheming, her primary concern remains her physical beauty and her fashions. David's assertion that he married a Jewish American Princess is particularly ludicrous here because this story takes place

²⁰ David notes that Abigail, the only woman who "really did love" him, was an anomaly amid these other women (*GK*, 62).

thousands of years before America was even recognized as a country. Thus, Heller's anachronism serves not only as a critique of Jewish history but also of contemporary Jewish culture.

After the birth of her son, David notes the way Bathsheba effortlessly assumes the role of the overbearing Jewish mother. Although Jewish law decrees the first-born son should assume the throne after the death of his father, Bathsheba relentlessly plagues her husband with unending praise for her son's cleverness, urging David to overlook antiquated laws to favor his younger son, Solomon. "Bathsheba manages very cozily for warmth with just her burning ambitions for herself and her son" (*GK*, 238). In contrast to David, Heller depicts Bathsheba as calculating, shrewd, and self-interested; her character is almost wholly without redeemable qualities. Because Jewish law decrees the mother passes on Jewish heritage to her children and not the father, *God Knows*' focus on the wily, manipulative mother figure suggests it is also the mother who perpetrates Jewish stereotypes. As a concubine, Bathsheba can teach David how to love, how to express his emotion, and how to become a better human being. But, as soon as she becomes a mother, she transforms her lover into a whiny, feeble patriarch and her son into an utterly malleable, dependent dolt. In both *God Knows* and *Good as Gold*, Heller depicts the Jewish-mother figure as the apex of all ethnic stereotypes.

Though the invocation of Jewish stereotypes explicitly mocks the conventional vision of the Jewish community, Heller's stereotypes pale in comparison to his direct assault on the Jewish religion. Throughout the text, David references an ongoing feud he has with God and rattles off snide comments about Him, even going so far as to suggest He no longer exists (*GK*, 16). David boasts that God is, in reality, unconcerned with human life and implies that even he, a lowly mortal king, deserves to be revered more than Him. He says, "I have my faults, God knows, and

I may even be among the first to admit them, but to this very day I know in my bones that I'm a much better person than He is" (*GK*, 16-17). In one of his most scathing commentaries on God, David recaps a conversation He had with Moses during the plagues in Egypt, significantly altering the official, biblical version of the event. Moses questions the incessant suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt, and God calmly explains that his methods are only intended to show the Gentiles that which they will never actually see: He has chosen the Jews as his chosen race of people, but He will never be able to impress this fact upon the other religions (*GK*, 35). "That's what he promised and that's all that He gave us, along with a complicated set of restrictive dietary laws that have not made life easier" (*GK*, 35). In this account, God admits that His methods are entirely nonsensical, but He attributes this complete lack of logic as a fundamental part of all religions (*GK*, 35). Coming from an author known for his satiric wit, such statements can be read as relatively playful and innocuous, but Heller's focus on Jewish religion rather than culture raises the stakes of his critique. In a way, Heller is not merely distancing himself from the Jewish Identity; he is confronting the very tenets that produce it.

However, even as Heller ruthlessly disparages religious affiliations, his portrayal of David's relationship with God warrants deeper analysis than his initial blasphemous words suggest. David frequently prefaces his rants about God with a litany of tragic events God bestowed upon him: his infant son's death and his daughter's rape, for example. In conjunction with his phenomenal outrage and sorrow following these events, David's words can be interpreted as his grief-ridden response to a series of unthinkable situations. Like many bereaved parents, David lashes out at a higher power for not protecting his innocent children from harm. David identifies his child's death as the direct and immediate cause of his break with the Jewish faith; his offensive debasement of God does not accurately represent his feelings toward

Jewishness as a whole but rather toward his perception of God's betrayal. "Until he lifted my sin from me and placed it on my baby, God and I were as friendly as anyone could imagine. I inquired for guidance whenever I wished to. He could always be counted on to respond" (GK, 30). Although David recognizes God's action as a response to his own indiscretions, his anger and sense of loss overwhelm him and prompt his vehement condemnation of all religious icons, especially God. Yet, his relationship with God prior to his child's death demonstrates his profound respect and admiration for Him. Through David's bout with God, Heller suggests that religious affiliation does not wholly determine one's Jewishness. David articulates his serious reservations about his relationship with God, but he never questions his relationship to his Jewish identity.

As one of the well-known narratives of the Jewish faith, the story of David also acts as a marker of Jewish community and solidarity. In the novel, David references the Star of David as proof of his importance in Jewish history because the Star is often worn as an emblem of one's Jewish heritage (GK, 18). For Heller, the image of David still serves as a unifying story for Jews worldwide, but David's story suggests the community of his descendents is actually more encompassing than traditionally thought. Through the narrative of *God Knows*, the character of David destabilizes the conventional boundaries of Jewishness while maintaining his status as one of the great leaders in Jewish history. David proves that the essence of Jewishness is not based on bloodlines or a genetic concept of race. Although ethnic purists often look down upon intermarriage, David notes that his own great-grandmother was not Jewish; she converted in order to marry his great-grandfather (GK, 40). For much of his life, David does not value his religion highly. He views his relationship with God as a war and considers religion to be just one of God's twisted experiments. Thus, religious devotion and unshakable faith do not

correlate to a strong sense of Jewishness for David. David demonstrates that the category of Jewishness is relatively fluid; the lack of religion, language, or traditional practice is not, in itself, enough to exclude an individual from the collective Jewish community.

Like *God Knows, Good as Gold* emphasizes the redeeming aspects of Gold's Jewish culture alongside the negative, underscoring the idea that the contemporary vision of Jewish culture must be humbled in order to establish a stronger, more encompassing community. Melvin Friedman notes that Heller caricatures Jewish culture in the novel, but the purpose of this caricature is not to ruthlessly perpetuate stereotypes of a large body of people. Rather, Heller shows that even the most stereotypical, loathsome Jewish character can find his place amid the Jewish community. Gold embodies a man utterly confused and overwhelmed by his perception of Jewish culture. Because he does not subscribe to any religious beliefs or revel in his Jewish heritage, he feels excluded from the Jewish community and mocked by those, such as his father and Greenspan, who appear more connected to their culture than he. Yet, he cannot escape his Jewish affiliations around his Gentile associates either. Gold's situation reflects a broader sense of confusion plaguing Jews like Gold and Heller, who want to retain some status within their ethnic community while, at the same time, divesting themselves from the boundaries of Jewishness that do not apply to them. Hence, Heller's caricature is not intended to be wholly unflattering or derogatory toward Jewish Identity. He offers his readers an opportunity to laugh at their own perception of Jewish culture and redeem a more individual interaction with Jewishness through the character of Bruce Gold.

Though Heller's initial antagonism may be read as an attempt to redraw the boundaries of the Jewish community through texts like *Good as Gold*, the author runs into the most difficulty accomplishing this task as he confronts past conceptions of community. Many critics consider

Heller's text based on an established concept of what constitutes Jewish literature and progressive Jewish thought. For instance, Judith Ruderman posits the argument, "Always wishing that he were not Jewish, always currying favor with non-Jewish father figures like Pugh Biddle Conover, Gold in fact does not act Jewish and therefore shouldn't call himself a Jew" (*JH*, 156).²¹ Ruderman voices an opinion similar to many critics of Jewish literature: the validity of one's Jewishness stems from a prescribed measure of Jewish characteristics. She proposes a judgment of Gold's Jewishness in reference to conventional symbols of the Jewish community. Gold does not pay deference to his Jewish elders, his Jewish faith, or his Jewish heritage; therefore, he does not fit what many critics consider the mold of a good Jewish man. This thought process represents one of the tenets Heller's text wants to deconstruct through the imposition of caricature, of the bad Jew, of Bruce Gold. In one interview, Heller explicates this theory of a new Jewish sensibility:

"*Good as Gold* does focus upon the Jewish experience, but ultimately Bruce Gold finds his experience is not particularly more Jewish than, well, mine. I feel that many people my age, people who went to college after the war and became involved in academic or literary activities, have had experiences that are not materially different from those of people who aren't Jewish."²²

Jewishness, for Heller, does not need to follow a language of differentiation; Jewishness cannot be measured in degrees, pitting one person's experience against another to determine a sort of hierarchy of cultural interaction. A difference in experience does not isolate the true Jews from non-Jews. Rather, Jewish identification develops through a process of internal reflection similar

²¹ Ruderman does present this argument in her text, but she does not wholly agree with it. Rather, she discusses this sentiment in relation to Heller's controversial standing among Jewish American authors.

²² Charlie Reilly, "Talking with Joseph Heller," in *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, James Nagel (ed), (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984), 177.

to Bruce Gold's narrative of introspection. This identification thus becomes more personal and more valuable to the individual; it allows Jewish people to widen the boundaries of the community and acknowledge a more extensive variety of Jewish experience in the history of Jewish American culture. Despite the proliferation of arguments like the one Ruderman presents, Heller's new vision for the Jewish community illustrates that one does not have to adhere to the old standards of Jewishness in order to belong.

Of course, this is not to say that Heller does not subscribe to a certain set of boundaries even for his broader conception of Jewish community. Like many contemporary Jewish texts, Heller focuses on family relationships as the prime determinant of Jewishness. As Bonnie Lyons argues, "In post-World War II American-Jewish fiction, family is the crucial bond that links – or chains – people together. In this fiction the family is the locus of narrative and the agent of meaning."²³ While Heller's Jewish characters do not embody the same cultural or religious mores as conventional Jewish characters, they do each demonstrate a profound respect for family ritual and custom in their own way. For instance, Bruce Gold reluctantly revels in the preparation and presentation of the family meal even as he tries to dissociate from his Jewish community. Just as Heller uses the tenets of the family to identify those who do belong to the community, he also employs the language of family to exclude non-Jews from his consideration. For instance, in *Good as Gold*, Heller makes it apparent that Gold's mistress, Andrea Conover, could never pass as a Jewish man's wife; her straightforward attitude and her underdeveloped palette will forever relegate her to Gentile status. Likewise, Gold lambastes Henry Kissinger, the secretary of state under Richard Nixon, by repeatedly stripping him of any credibility within

²³ Lyons, "American-Jewish Fiction Since 1945," 78.

Jewish society. In Gold's mind, Kissinger turned his back on his metaphorical Jewish family,²⁴ and in turn, the Jewish family has divested themselves of him.

In addition to his emphasis on the Jewish family, Heller refines his definition of his personal Jewish identity by focusing on his experiences with a local Jewish culture. Heller's settings typify his characters more than their allegiance to any specific nation, race, or religion. In *Catch-22*, the characters are bound together through World War II and the traumas that occur in the combat zone, but their nationalities, political ideologies, and personal backgrounds are too disparate for an understanding to exist between them through any other means. The majority of his succeeding novels, particularly those that deal with Jewish themes, are specifically set in Coney Island because the experience of being Jewish would inevitably be different depending on one's geographic location in America, and Joseph Heller can most accurately represent his personal knowledge of New York Jewishness. In her personal reflection on New York Jewishness, Doris Friedensohn explains the relationship thusly: "In an era before the concept of 'roots' took hold, New Yorkers 'passed.' We spoke standard English, appeared to transcend religious, class, and ethnic origins, and could, like the *Great Gatsby*, invent ourselves at will."²⁵ Within the realm of Coney Island, the Jewish characters do not cohere to any other broader conception of Jewishness; their connection to Jewish laws and customs, religious practices and beliefs, language, and status in American society are rarely shared between more than a single individual. The Coney Island Jew represents the possibility of "inventing" new boundaries of Jewishness, which would be almost wholly dependent on the individual's chosen level of interaction with Jewish culture. However, novels like *Good as Gold* draw important distinctions

²⁴ Though Kissinger's father was an Orthodox Jew, Walter Isaacson claims Kissinger would often "pretend not to be Jewish" as a youth and eventually "abandon[ed] the practice of Judaism" in college. Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 19, 21, 30.

²⁵ Friedensohn, "Yom Kippur at Yum Luk: Reflections on Eating, Ethnicity, and Identity," 249.

between the lives of Coney Island Jews and their counterparts in Washington, Eastern Europe, and other densely populated areas, emphasizing physical place as the most unifying factor of an ethnic identity.

Thus, Heller's focus on a Coney Island Jewry provides him with one visible, geographic way to re-envision a Jewish community to which he also belongs. Coney Island provides an ideal space for this mode of reinterpretation in part because of its long history with a nontraditional body of Jewish inhabitants. In the early part of the century, Coney Island became one of the most frequented stops for Jewish exiles from Russia, creating what David Roskies calls "a whole era in the Jewish American culture."²⁶ For Heller, Coney Island was not a center of religious education or congregation growing up; he associates the Island with its landmark amusements, its low economic status, and its predominantly Jewish sector (*NT*, 33, 36). Though Heller remembers the physical distinction between the Jewish sector and other ethnic demarcations, he also notes that interactions between the cultures remained fluid. In *Now and Then*, Heller intimates that the experience of being Jewish in Coney Island as one which did not bear much significance in his childhood interactions. According to this narrative, a Coney Island Jew did not necessarily think of himself as any different from his Italian or Eastern European neighbors. Hence, for Heller, the definition of his Jewishness did not depend on his differentiation from other religions or ethnicities. While he does not share in a conception of Jewishness reliant on a shared language, religion, or experience, he does still think of himself as part of the Jewish Coney Island community and, therefore, part of the larger Jewish community.

By the publication of his last book, Heller has discovered a way to incorporate Jewish identity without feeling obligated to explore Jewish themes in his literature. *Portrait of an Artist*,

²⁶ David G. Roskies, "Coney Island, USA: America in the Yiddish Literary Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Hana Wirth-Neshir and Michael P. Kramer (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70.

as an Old Man focuses on the private life of a public artist struggling to create his most memorable and appreciated work. The novel explores the artist's relationship with his wife, his reflections on his life and career, and snapshots of his personal history. Yet, in what becomes his most personal piece of published writing, Pota barely mentions his religion or ethnicity, downplaying the importance of a collective heritage on his individual self-consciousness. Heller writes, "His name was Eugene Pota, because that's what I want it to be, and in ethnic background he was central European or Turk, I guess, and maybe partly or fully Jewish. But none of that enters into it" (PA, 36). Unlike his older novels, Heller does not try to evade or deny the Jewish identification of his characters. But, he does demonstrate that any sense of Jewishness he creates in Pota is purely a construct of his imagination. Pota does not represent any cohesive group of Eastern European Jews because Heller happens to identify him as such. He does not signify the religious, cultural, or political beliefs of any Jewish faction merely because he is a Jewish character. He does not even characterize the experience of the Jewish writer in America; he only hopes to capture his experience as one individual writer who may also happen to be Jewish. Heller deliberately leaves Pota's relationship to Judaism unclear by claiming Pota's heritage to be possibly "partly or fully Jewish." Pota's position in the Jewish community does not enhance or elucidate the story at hand. It bears no relevance on his identification as an author following in the shadow of Modernism; therefore, Heller does not need to address his ethnicity, solving his previous concern regarding the incorporation of ethnicity without engaging in a thorough exploration of it.

Thus, Heller's *Portrait of an Artist* not only affirms the author's position amid a lauded community of Modernist writers; it also illustrates his new level of comfort specifically as a Jewish American author. As someone who identifies more as an American than a Jewish

American, a novel focused on the Jewish experience can seem quite problematic. However, by redefining the boundaries of the Jewish community, he discovers a way in which his works fit into an ethnocentric body of literature. *Portrait of an Artist*, the final stage of Heller's development as an ethnic artist, recognizes Jewish identity as part of the artist's whole person, but it exemplifies an ethnic identity that does not require negation or qualification. Pota's relationship to his Jewish identity demonstrates the way in which an author's writing need not be a defense of his Jewishness but rather an acknowledgement of it.

Chapter 3:

"The Only Way I Can Define Myself": The Therapy of Writing in *Good as Gold*

"If the crisis of modern Jewish culture is a crisis of loss, it is also, as I have been implying, a crisis of legitimation."

-- Norman Finkelstein

Good as Gold, the first of Heller's novels to feature explicitly Jewish themes, envisions the Jewish American experience in a vastly different light than other novels of its type. As Bruce Gold, the title character, prepares to write the ultimate authoritative book on the Jewish experience in America, he begins to equate the communal conception of Jewishness as mere code for oppression, religious fervor, and emasculated manhood. Although Gold can never truly free himself from identification as a Jew, his interactions in the text enable him to refute the prescriptive nature of belonging in the collective and impress upon him the importance of individual identity formation. Throughout the text, Gold deconstructs preconceptions of the Jew in American society in order to rebuild his identity first as a modern man, then as an American, and finally as the accepting author of his inescapable, but more personal, Jewish identity. Despite Gold's bouts with external prejudice and stereotyping, *Good as Gold* argues the most concrete marker of Jewishness is the individual's definition of the self and the individual's progression toward tolerance of broader cultural ambiguity.

With his publication of *Good as Gold*, Joseph Heller acknowledges contemporary critics' emphasis on Jewish authors and their ostensibly *Jewish* literature, but the book refuses to be a celebration of this stance. Rather, through Gold, Heller introduces a character who concurrently appraises and subverts a shared sense of identity with the larger Jewish community. As Heller's first Jewish-identified novel, *Good as Gold* explores many of Hana Wirth-Nesher's questions of identity politics through this character who boasts no affiliations to a religious group, no fluency

in either Hebrew or Yiddish, and no desire to be labeled as a Jew in American society. Heller deliberately instills in Gold a multitude of commonly held preconceptions of the Jewish American Identity and surrounds him with a bevy of stock characters to contest his critics' expectation that ethnic self-representation must be uplifting and laudatory if it is to contribute to the conversation on Jewish identity. Yet, in the end, Gold learns to revel in his Jewishness precisely because he has refuted the expected, prescribed aspects of his Jewish identification and developed an identity that better encompasses his relationship to his ethnicity. Gold espouses almost no traditional values that might tie him to the ideological Jewish community, but despite his constant complaining, he cannot bring himself to leave it in favor of the ethnically devoid, spurious climate of mainstream American life.

Heller's own biography bears striking similarities to the fictionalized Gold, and yet the differences between the two are significant enough to prevent the book from becoming purely autobiographical. The Heller family – father, mother, brother, and sister – emigrated from Eastern Europe, and the youngest Heller son, Joseph, was born into a primarily Jewish Coney Island community, similar to the setting in *Good as Gold* (NT, 5, 11). His father died when he was very young, leaving his mother and older siblings to support him. Just as Gold was ignorant of his mother's terminal illness as a child, Heller did not understand the causes of his father's sudden death until he was much older (NT, 13). While Heller went to school in his insular Jewish community, his much older siblings scoured New York to find employers who did not explicitly discriminate against Jewish applicants (NT, 7). The Heller family never considered themselves to be particularly observant Jews, but they occasionally went to a synagogue on the high holy days "to keep up traditional good appearances" (NT, 149). His parents spoke Yiddish

but, like Gold's parents, did not require such aspects of their traditional Jewish culture to appear in their American-born son (*JH*, 16).

Hence, *Good as Gold* espouses many of the characteristics of a Joycean *Portrait* story; the main character, an ever-hopeful yet somewhat disillusioned artist, appears to be a replica of his real-life creator. The resemblance between author and subject provides the story with a strong sense of verisimilitude and cultural validity, but the fictional text allows the author to manipulate and accentuate aspects of his character's identity that he does not share in his own life. As with several of Heller's texts, the literary influence of predecessor authors, particularly figures such as James Joyce and Bernard Malamud, manifests itself at several key points in *Good as Gold*, which guides the reader to reinterpret the relationship between Gold, Heller, and the collective Jewish American identity.

Within the opening sentences of the novel, Heller establishes a connection between the questions of ethnicity inherent in *Good as Gold* and those plaguing his own authorial identity. One of the introductory epigraphs, a short quotation from Bernard Malamud,¹ serves a dual purpose in its framing of the story: it pays tribute to another recently published Jewish author, whose works are often noted as integral to the canon of modern Jewish literature,² and it foregrounds the idea that it is often the audience who expects Jewish writers to address Jewish themes in their work more so than it is the desire of the writer. Not long before the publication of *Good as Gold*, an interested reader asked Heller why he had not written a book with a focus on Jewish characters and the Jewish experience in America.³ At the time, he responded with his signature reply: he did not feel truly qualified to write about a Jewish experience because he was

¹ The epigraph reads, "If you ever forget you're a Jew, a gentile will remind you."

² Friedman, "Something Jewish Happened," 196.

³ Reilly, "An Interview with Joseph Heller," 214.

not exactly sure he had one to share.⁴ Yet, this reader's striking inquiry spurred Heller to produce just such a novel, which would engage the concept of a culturally legitimate Jewish experience. This novel, *Good as Gold*, converses with its predecessors' attempts to express a collective Jewish sensibility, a sensibility primarily of suffering and isolation in an atmosphere of extreme prejudice. However, like Gold, Heller cannot achieve a sincere expression of the Jewish Identity because his own relationship to his Jewishness is so ambiguous. Gold's character becomes an expression of this ambiguity — a man who is simultaneously Jewish and not Jewish, respectful of his culture and wholly impertinent to its value system, representative of the second-generation experience and utterly unfathomable within the broader community.

Because Heller is an author and a self-identified Jewish American, readers often look for ways in which his writing reflects his cultural background. The emergence of cultural studies and representative "Jewish writers" like Malamud, Roth, and Bellow ensure that the question of authenticity and identity will forever loom over contemporary Jewish American authors.⁵ With the publication of *Good as Gold*, Heller acknowledges this fact, yet he uses the novel to critique this mode of thinking in significant ways. In the novel's beginning, for instance, Gold subscribes to the idea that there is a common cultural sense of what it means to be Jewish as he vows to write a significant visionary book on the subject. As the story develops, Gold begins to view his Jewish identity as the albatross around his neck. His outward Jewishness frequently hinders his prospects for success, and subsequently, he resents everything in his life that connects him to a Jewish heritage, including his family, his name, and his fellow Jews. By the end of the novel, Heller champions the idea that Gold's individual sense of self is far healthier and more palatable than a prescribed version of communal identity, but paradoxically, this individuality only

⁴ Reilly, "An Interview with Joseph Heller," 214.

⁵ Melvin Friedman is one of several authors who list these authors as the "triumvirate" of Jewish American fiction. Friedman., "Something Jewish Happened," 196.

becomes possible after Gold embraces the aspects of his ethnic culture that he critiques most vehemently throughout the course of the novel.

However, the shift from the devaluation of a communal sense of self to an appreciation for an individual one is not an easy one for Heller to depict without appearing trite or clichéd. Thus, Gold does not undergo any kind of sudden revelation or spontaneous moral change within the text. Rather, Heller systematically deconstructs the audience's conception of the Jewish identity and rebuilds a version of Jewishness that is more specific to Gold and his interaction with his culture. In this way, Heller illustrates the idea that the boundaries demarcating specific communities remain fluid. Gold may not appear to fit into the Jewish community, but by revising the definition of American Jewishness, he can transform himself from outsider to insider status. This mode of identity formation unites Heller with a host of other authors who also confront issues of ethnic classification, particularly James Joyce. As with Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*, Heller's novel begins by invoking the conventional assumption of a culture's boundaries and definitions, proceeds to destabilize the overarching claims of such definitions by the time the reader reaches the middle of the text, and ends with an utterly blurred conception of the specific community in question.

Heller emphasizes that Gold is first and foremost a modern American man regardless of his other cultural affiliations. Although Gold's family identifies as Jewish, Gold's value system reflects his personal association with a stereotypical American manhood; he implicitly defines himself as secular, capitalist, and chronically lecherous. Professionally, he contemplates the value of his work more in terms of its monetary than aesthetic or social worth. Although he is a married man with three children, he has no qualms about voicing his adulterous sexual ventures and scandalous fantasies to his male friends. At a lunch meeting with his childhood friend and

publisher, he boasts, “I fuck girls, Lieberman ... Blond girls, Lieberman, blond, the blondest girls you ever saw. All of them beautiful” (*GG*, 239). The women’s blondness connotes Gold’s desire to ally himself with a distinctly American standard of beauty and the conventions of the American Dream. He initiates sexual flings with a work associate from his previous position, a political assistant from what he hopes to be his future job, and his daughter’s present high-school teacher, all of whom represent fully assimilated, ethnically ambiguous female identities. Despite his father’s objections, he would have no second thoughts about divorce if his hypothetical employers in Washington ever objected to his current wife. He has strayed about as far from traditional family values as possible. His daughter’s academic failures are an embarrassment to him, but rather than help her develop her own work ethic, he helps her cheat her way through school. He expresses no fond regard or respect for his parents, he complains incessantly about his wife, and he is utterly disdainful rather than supportive of his older siblings. Like many of his generation, Gold longs to distance himself from his ethnic identity because it embodies a long history of suffering, and above all, difference from the majority. Instead, he spends much of his time in Washington trying to ally himself with the Conovers, a family with an established American legacy who hold the key to his entry into mainstream American society. By defining himself like this at the beginning of the novel, Gold implies he would rather associate himself with the stereotype of the valueless, self-indulgent American than risk identification as an Other.

At his core, Gold typifies the American capitalist spirit. He is motivated by the pursuit of money and elevated social standing at the expense of almost everything else in his life. In the opening pages of the novel, he refers to his upcoming project – a book outlining the Jewish experience in America – more in terms of a new business venture than a meaningful or uplifting contribution to existing Jewish literature. As his musings come closer to a typical, melodramatic

expression of the immigrant situation in America, his discussion also becomes infused with concerns over money and selling power. Although one friend notes that narratives of the Jewish experience in America have been written many times before, Gold asserts that he has the creative edge that will certainly catch readers' attention despite the hackneyed subject. He retorts, "'I can make it racy and light enough to appeal to the mass market. There'd be a strong tilt toward sexuality'" (GG, 8). While Gold simultaneously expresses a desire for originality and sincerity in this particular book, he is also constructing an identity and a cultural history valued more for its market potential than its authenticity.

While Gold's obsession with money unites him with the American capitalist spirit, it is also emblematic of the stereotypes inherent in his own Jewish identity. In his role as the Jewish patriarch, he obsesses over the cost of others' expenditures, propagating the stereotype of the stingy, money-grubbing Jew. He continues to teach only to pay his sons' exorbitant tuition bills and keep his family in relative comfort, he envies his brother's somewhat inadvertent success and wealth, and he obsesses over the prospect of a high-paying job in Washington as a way to escape both. He craves power, prestige, and above all, wealth regardless of the toll such desires may take on his family. Within his own family, the women of the house hold the ultimate authority, subjugating his masculinity as they take control of his house for their parties. As if Gold were still a child, his sisters still select the foods he should eat for dinner and advise him on all matters concerning his job prospects. Though Gold's mother died when he was young, his sisters and his wife assume the roles of overbearing Jewish women in his life. In many ways, Gold is representative of the Jewish "schlemiel," the bumbling, Jewish fool used mainly for his comic appeal.⁶ This surface-level reading of Gold's Jewishness does not reveal an authentic, well thought-out vision of a Jewish man. He is the Jewish man as an ignorant non-Jew might

⁶ Ruth Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 4.

imagine him. At the beginning of the novel, Gold is so versed in the language of Jewish stereotype that he begins to view himself in such terms. In order to find his authenticity, Gold must first deconstruct this version of himself and locate the "real" Jew beneath the stereotypes.

Each time Gold encounters another character who treats him as a stereotype, he comes closer to realizing that he will never be able to escape his Jewish identity in the eyes of others. As the novel progresses, Gold struggles to negotiate between his tendency to view this inscribed Jewishness with contempt and his inclination to accept it as a significant, meaningful part of himself. As Gold begins to accept the inevitability that outsiders will always decode him as a Jew in a largely non-Jewish world, he must confront the preconceived idea of a Jewish Identity before he can create an identity that will bring him authenticity and strength. First, he defines his Jewish identity as one which is not based on any particular religious beliefs; though he is Jewish, he has no affiliations with Judaism. Next, he compares himself with people like his publisher, his father, and his stepmother to demonstrate that he is not one of the stock characters in this novel. He cannot write the book of the Jewish experience precisely because he can only characterize his own individual experience with Jewish culture; though dozens of other writers have experimented with this overarching formulation of Jewishness, Gold cannot claim to be an expert on anything outside of himself. Finally, he reconsiders his own hostility toward specific markers of his Jewish culture, such as language and cuisine, and discovers ways to draw pride from them rather than shame. For Gold to develop any kind of substantial, authentic identity, he has to envisage a relationship with Jewishness that will validate his sense of self rather than dictate it.

Although Heller critiques Gold's aversion to the Jewish Identity at times, he also sympathizes with Gold's reluctance to identify himself as a Jew.⁷ The most vivid depictions of the Jewish experience in Gold's life revolve around instances of extreme prejudice in both his past and present circumstances. For instance, at Rose's birthday party, the sisters recount the specific hardships their Jewish immigrant family encountered during the Great Depression. In one of the few extensive surges of dialogue, Rose remembers going from temp agency to temp agency looking for prospective jobs that did not advertise a ban on Jewish workers (*GG*, 114-117). When her situation required it, she would disavow her Jewishness and identify as Protestant in the hopes of finding a job. "I didn't even know what a Protestant was but I knew it was good" (*GG*, 115). Prior to this discussion, Gold mocks his eldest sister for staying in the same low status position for the past forty years, but Rose's description of the Depression-era job search stifles his sarcasm. Rose's story, which references a similar account from Heller's autobiography, helps clarify Gold's inconsistent desires to both divest from his Jewish heritage and embrace it as a marker of his ethnic authenticity. Prejudice has prevented Gold's family from fully achieving an American ideal of success or belonging, but it has also encouraged them to appreciate and depend on the insular family community for support, respect, and righteousness.

Similarly, Gold's iciness toward his older brother temporarily subsides when Sid recounts their brief residence in an all-Christian area of town (*GG*, 321). In this story, the physical mark of Sid's Jewishness becomes an invitation for violence and degradation as the neighborhood kids pin him to the ground and spit on his genitals before they thought he had earned the right to play

⁷ While Heller inserts relatively few direct editorial comments regarding Gold's relationship to Jewish culture, his satiric portrayal of Gold's internal thoughts appears to be his acknowledgement that Gold's aversion sometimes extends beyond a reasonable critique of the Jewish community. However, Gold's critique represents his frustration with the perceived boundaries of Jewish culture and are, therefore, understandable to some extent.

among them (*GG*, 321). Although Gold does not undergo physical or economic suffering, he does experience an equally disconcerting case of bigotry when he eagerly arrives for his first day of service on a bona fide Presidential Commission in Washington (*GG*, 212). As the only Jew on the panel, he is quickly reminded that his opinion is irrelevant to the Commission merely because the other members have little or no regard for their ethnically identifiable peers. Though Heller does not extol Gold's shying away from his ethnicity, these moments of intense emotional storytelling encourage the reader to consider a more sympathetic response toward Gold.

These stories of suffering lend authenticity to Gold's cultural identity, which often appears to be lacking from his knowledge of the family. Gold suspects the family's "Jewish experience" is more likely the product of pure invention than a substantive relationship with Jewish culture. Julius Gold's references to the lesser-known Jewish holidays serves as an excellent illustration of the ability to invent oneself. Julius agrees to move back to his Florida residence just as soon as his favorite Jewish holidays have ended, but he does not actually state which holiday will mark his intended departure. Gold is convinced that his father continues to manufacture names for nonexistent holidays as a ploy to stay in New York year-round, and he surveys siblings, students, and friends to find conclusive evidence of the invention. Though he does eventually realize that the fault lies with his own ignorance rather than his father's cunning, the concept of invented identity has already taken root in the reader's mind. Each of the characters constructs a version of their ethnic identity based on their limited knowledge of and interaction with Jewish culture, but Gold has yet to realize that this selective Jewishness can produce equally authentic associations with the larger Jewish community. Julius's coded, ambiguous descriptions of the high holidays seem contrived and counterfeit at first, but they act

as examples of concrete evidence within the text that contend the prescriptive definition of the Jewish Identity excludes many authentic, though often nontraditional, Jewish people.

Even Gold invents a version of himself in order to establish his authority on the subject of the "Jewish experience." Because he is both Jewish and a writer, Gold's audience expects certain elements of his Jewish identity to appear in his texts. After one reader questions his avoidance of Jewish characters and themes, he feels compelled to write the book of his cultural roots and of a communal sense of Jewish identity. At first, Gold believes this will be a relatively simple task until his family and friends question his authority on the Jewish experience. He soon discovers that the "Jewish experience" cannot be conveyed using a common lexicon of values and familiarity, particularly for the generation of American Jews growing up post-World War II. Ronald Bush argues that a similar impasse occurs in Philip Roth's fiction, which addresses parallel themes and time periods to Heller's work. Bush argues that the idea of an authentic Jewishness has become unattainable for writers of this period, but the loss of this form of authenticity requires authors to construct "a more sophisticated notion of identity," which focuses less on a conception of community and more on individual definitions.⁸ While Gold searches simultaneously for both a shared sense of Jewish Identity and an escape from just such an archetypal Jewish characterization, he eventually realizes that his only authority stems from his own interaction with his Jewish roots and his primarily Jewish geographic environment.

Throughout the novel, Heller frames discussions of the Jewish experience in terms of its individual rather than collective meaning. In his initial conversation with Joannie, she stresses that, as a broad cultural category, Jewishness is impalpable. She emphatically differentiates between his Jewish experience and her own. While she retains her allegiance to her local

⁸ Ronald Bush, "Property, Shmoperty! Philip Roth, Postmodernism, and the Contradictions of Cultural Property," *Claiming the Stones/Naming the Bones: Cultural Property and the Negotiation of National and Ethnic Identity*, Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (eds), (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2002), 348.

temples to prove that she has not become a gentile, she has created a sense of her own ethnicity that seems more palatable to a Christian community. In contrast, Gold has maintained the same definition of his own Jewishness and has ended up resenting himself for it. Neither party follows a preconceived societal definition of what it means to be Jewish, but both are Jews nonetheless. Further demonstrating his inability to conceptualize a shared definition of Jewishness, Gold cannot establish meaningful relationships with any of the other Jewish characters. Feelings of anger and dread dominate his interactions with his father and older brother, two of the only first-generation Jewish immigrants in the novel. Out of a need to establish his comparative wealth and success over at least one of his peers, Gold visits his friend Lieberman solely to continue their unstated competition. He is even outwardly confrontational with the Weinrock brothers, who represent the kind of success he will never know. Because he cannot find a shared cultural meaning, he has to develop one for himself. For him, the bond of food, intermittent Jewish idioms, and an overbearing family provide the definitive boundaries of his Jewishness rather than the more conventional relationship with religion, Hebrew, or tradition. In a book about the inability of one man to express a communal Jewishness, it is precisely the singularity of his experience which provides him with the ultimate authority.

Despite his reluctance to be identified as a Jew in America, Gold gradually realizes he cannot separate himself from his cultural heritage, and in many ways, he discovers he would not actually want to. In particular, his relationship to the rituals of family meals and consumption of food is both a vexing and strangely calming, stabilizing force in Gold's life. The thought of his family's uninhibited criticisms of his work during these meals produces incredible apprehension in Gold, but the prospect of savoring these painstakingly prepared foods in this space mollifies him and provides the support he needs to make it through the meal with sanity mostly intact

(GG, 98). The descriptions of food make up some of the longest, thematically united passages in the novel, drawing the reader to consume the ceremonious description of the family meal as eagerly as the Gold family devours its more tangible aspects (GG, 100-102). Gold's relationship with his cultural traditions becomes reminiscent of an individual suffering from bulimia. Throughout the novel, he tries to starve himself of anything that might mark him as Jewish publicly, but when confronted with distressing or self-deprecating situations, he privately gorges on the foods of his culture for comfort.⁹ Though he despises his own feelings of inadequacy around his family, the wealth of Jewish culture available at the family meal lures him to their side time and time again; it remains the most powerful calming force for him in the face of crisis (GG, 98).

Although Gold mocks his family's ritualistic, obsessional relationship to their food to some extent, he eventually finds himself judging his new gentile mistress by the standard of food she prepares.¹⁰ Gold believes he must marry Andrea in order to be considered for the position of Secretary of State, a position for which he has no experience or preparation. But, as he spends more time with his various "colleagues" in Washington, including Andrea, he begins to realize there is more merit in the boring, routine simplicity of his old life than he previously thought. Gold starts to develop a more genuine admiration for the traditional, secular aspects of his ethnicity as he contemplates the reality of life as this woman's husband. While family dinners may be eternally vexing for Gold, he takes comfort in the quality of food presented to him there.¹¹ Food is his sanctuary, and Andrea consistently reveals her lack of respect for it. When

⁹ Part of this idea developed after a conversation with Elizabeth Bender at The University of Michigan.

¹⁰ Marshall Toman may be referring to this passage in his article. Marshall Toman, "Good as Gold and Heller's Family Ethic," *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 10 (Kent State University Press, 1991), 216.

¹¹ Doris Friedensohn's personal reflection on Jewish American culture posits a similar connection between food and an appreciation for Jewish culture. Friedensohn, "Yom Kippurs at Yum Luk: Reflections on Eating, Ethnicity, and Identity," 253.

Andrea disposes of his coveted Estonian black bread, Gold's reacts with horrified disbelief. Heller writes:

"I bring her Black Forest ham with Pommery mustard and the juiciest baked salmon, and she gives me shit. ...Hopelessness enveloped him like an enervating fog at the mere idea of trying to convince her that the difference between an ordinary supermarket jam and Tiptree Little Scarlet Strawberry Preserves lay at the essence of their chances for a happy union" (GG, 430).

He claims that he cannot wait to distance himself from his family, their inane arguments, and their compulsive fixation on the ritual of family meals, but any attempt to separate himself from such an ingrained part of his identity would be an exercise in futility. Though this faux pas does not convince Gold to completely end his affair, he does relinquish the utopian fantasy of Andrea as the new Mrs. Gold.

Through the inclusion of this particular scene between Gold and Andrea, Heller craftily establishes his literary connection to other unconventional Jewish characters from the past, including James Joyce's Leopold Bloom. Generally, Gold's internal rant illustrates his finicky personality with regard to his food; he remembers one of his wife's many jokes championing her as the only woman who could ever hope to discern Gold's contrary nature. "'I'd like to see one of his college students figure out when he asks for rye bread with seeds whether he means caraway seeds or black seeds. When he asks for fish for dinner he usually wants liver and when he asks for liver he wants to eat out'" (GG, 430). Gold's insistence on the purest, most flavorful ingredients, like his particular favorite brand of jam and mustard, is reminiscent of Bloom's equally intense fixation with the preparation of his food in the Calypso chapter of *Ulysses*.¹² The detailed descriptions of food and cooking techniques espoused within *Good as Gold* link the

¹² James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Media Group, 2005), 60.

work to a longstanding tradition of unconventional Jewish representation in literature. Gold's fanatical relationship to food in this scene elucidates the various ways in which characters like Bloom become useful models for Gold's distinctive type of Jewish identity.

This scene accentuates the nontraditional, secular aspects of Gold's Jewish identity as well. Just as Bloom salivates over the thought of pork kidneys and ham, Gold revels in his *traif*,¹³ or non-kosher, delicacies. In his outburst against Andrea, he mentions the Black Forest ham, one of the most recognizably non-kosher foods to Jews and gentiles alike, first to differentiate his refined, sophisticated tastes from her ingenuous palate. Moments earlier, Gold criticizes his mistress for not knowing the importance of slab bacon, shrimp, and clams in everyday cooking. Heller deliberately highlights the taboo notion of a Jew cooking non-kosher meals when he writes, "By the third time he was irascible, not tickled, at the oddity in circumstance that found him, a Jew, dissertating to her on the esoteric virtues of slab bacon"(GG, 429). Joyce stresses Bloom's love of *traif* foods as a way of distancing this hybrid, Irish character from the gentile's narrow conception of Jewish identity; Bloom's relationship to his Jewishness transcends his cuisine or his religion. Likewise, Gold is entirely unrepresentative of traditional Jewish culture. Heller's inclusion of this scene emphatically marks Gold more as an urbane, fastidious American consumer than a conscientious member of an orthodox Jewish community.

Language, like cuisine, allies Gold with a collective identity at times when he needs to differentiate those who are in the group and those who are not in order to placate his own identity crisis. The use of an ethnically derived language situates Gold within the symbolic boundary of his culture and grants him the right to identify as an insider. Though Heller employs periodic Yiddish phrases throughout the novel, his choice of language explodes into a twelve-page

¹³ Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 406.

cacophony of alternating English and Yiddish invective as Gold dissects the public career of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a fellow Jewish American. Prior to this outcry, Gold's father, an Eastern European immigrant, is the primary Yiddish speaker, and even his usage sparsely populates the page. Gold identifies with Yiddish predominantly when remembering unpleasant conversations with his father. Like many second-generation Jewish Americans, Gold wants to be identified as an American first and foremost, and any presence of Yiddish in his speech would more likely align him with what Martha Banta calls the "Old World." The aural marker of Yiddish would only highlight his difference within his largely gentile community.¹⁴ She explains that the use of Yiddish in writing or in speech provides evidence of a stereotyped vision of the Jewish identity in the American mind. "In addition to what America could glean from exposure to this strange language, the look of the bodily forms of the new immigrants also told them what they thought they needed to know."¹⁵ Because Gold valorizes a racially undefined American identity that would separate him from the constant debasement and devaluation of his Jewish family experience, he tries to avoid associating with anything overtly Jewish, including his cultural idioms. However, like Jewish cuisine, Yiddish remains a source of comfort and pride for him at a moment when his identity cannot be legitimately defined as either Jewish or American.

Gold's short burst of Yiddish becomes such a matter of pride for him because it is one of the few arguments he can use to differentiate his escape from Henry Kissinger's Jewishness. To both Gold and his family, Kissinger represents a Jew who has sold out: he gave up his Jewishness in order to become Richard Nixon's sycophant, a man who would kneel down and pray with his Christian president just to please the American public (*GG*, 291). While Gold

¹⁴ Martha Banta, "Of What Language, Pray, Is 'The American Mind'?" *Jewish in America*, Sara Blair and Jonathan Freedman (eds), (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 49.

¹⁵ Banta, "Of What Language, Pray, Is 'The American Mind,'" 48.

condemns Kissinger for forsaking his heritage, his own aspirations are unnervingly comparable to those of his adversary. He, too, seeks to erase all evidence of his Jewish culture and turns his back on his Jewish family, particularly his wife and daughter, in order to advance in the American political system. Although his gentile peers within the government never forget his Jewishness, Gold fruitlessly wishes he could. As Gold realizes the bigotry inherent in politics and his diminishing prospects for ever obtaining a significant job in Washington, he unleashes his aggression on Kissinger, whom he considers to be one of the few widely accepted "Jewish" leaders in America. When Ralph Newsome, an old college friend in Washington, equates him with Kissinger, Gold releases a torrent of Yiddish insults, which tear apart Kissinger's public addresses and personal statements. His knowledge of Yiddish lends him cultural validity here and provides him with the authority to criticize this national leader's lack of authenticity, thereby establishing at least one difference between the two men. Rather than live as a culturally devoid yes-man in the phony world of government, Gold chooses to identify himself as outwardly Jewish in this scene to mark the beginning of his transformation into a self-conceived definition of Jewishness.

As Gold's frustrations with discrimination and exclusion escalate, the focus of his writing changes from the benign, hack piece on the Jewish experience to an openly hostile exposé on Kissinger's career. Yet, Gold is not engaging in objective scholarly research to evaluate Kissinger's many controversial decisions during his tenure as Secretary of State. Gold selectively authors his knowledge of the politician through the short newspaper clippings he chooses to present. Almost all of the articles focus on his involvement in the Nixon scandals, the Vietnam War, and the Red Scare politics of mid-century America. Gold even tries to be charitable by including a few more positive mentions of Kissinger, which all serve to highlight

his hypocrisy despite Gold's claim to incorporate complimentary viewpoints as well. One clipping states, "On many Sundays [Kissinger and his college friend] took long walks. [Kissinger] spoke of the power of love, and said that the only truly unforgivable sin is to use people as if they were objects" (*GG*, 388). The book on Kissinger becomes more than just a pastime for Gold; it comes to represent one of the few ways he can exert his authorial control anymore. Through his clippings and commentaries, Gold finds a way to align himself with a faction of the Jewish American population, whose hatred of this traitorous Jewish politician unites them despite their varied religious and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, Gold develops an ability to relate to his cantankerous, constantly displeased father through their mutual abhorrence of Kissinger and the Nixon regime. Gold learns that he cannot control how other people view his Jewishness, but he believes this new book may redirect their view to cast judgment on him in relation to other more despicable, loathsome Jews in American society, such as Henry Kissinger.

While the clippings present Kissinger as an ignorant, incompetent leader who exists in the same league as Nazi party members (*GG*, 383), the specific examples and Yiddish insults Gold uses to describe his foe also reflect on his own past indiscretions. In one instance, Gold degrades Kissinger for manipulating his influence with the legendary Rockefeller family as a way of furthering his political career. This passage seeks to undermine Kissinger's presence in American politics by critiquing his reliance on his high-powered Washington friends, but as it challenges Kissinger's methods, it implicates Gold for the very same reason. Gold tries to charm Pugh Biddle Conover, a wealthy American socialite, in the hopes that Conover will support Gold's entry into the realm of politics and supply him with any economic influence he may need. Heller further satirizes the connection between Kissinger and Gold in this passage when he again

invokes Conover's name. Directly after Gold lambastes Kissinger for his relationship with the Rockefellers, Gold fears that such a viciously critical book will never sell to a mass market, and his friend suggests he solicit Conover's far-reaching influence to complete the project (GG, 395). Comparatively, the Yiddish invectives demonstrate that Gold's relationship to Jewish culture is not quite as dissimilar as he likes to purport. Gold's father refers to him as a *shaygetz*, or an uneducated gentile,¹⁶ when he questions the validity of Julius' professed holy days, and Greenspan, the Jewish FBI officer, repeatedly tells Gold that he is a shame to his race.¹⁷ In his tirade against Kissinger, Gold uses both of these words in his most bitter depictions of his nemesis, drawing an unintended parallel between Kissinger's cultural background and his own. Though Gold's attack on Kissinger allows him to relish his cultural superiority and feel more united with the broader Jewish community temporarily, the text argues that this transformation cannot be so simple.

The stylistic use of Yiddish is one of several key elements that solidify Gold's individual Jewish identity. Yet, the words he chooses are not exclusively Jewish anymore; many of them have entered the lexicon of the average gentile reader as well. Many of the words are not spelled the same as they typically appear in American Yiddish dictionaries, implying that Gold's emphasis is not on accuracy but on the visual association of Yiddish as a primarily Jewish cultural form. Gussie Gold, his stepmother, refers to the family's use of language as "local Yiddish," reiterating the idea that the Jewish people, both in America and worldwide, are not supposed to understand this form of their language. It is invoked only to serve Gold's purposes and present him with an opportunity to revel in a Jewishness that allows him to feel morally

¹⁶ Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish*, 329-330.

¹⁷ Greenspan uses the term *shonda* when referring to Gold.

superior temporarily. His choice of Yiddish words implies that he is not only a better Jew than Kissinger; he is, broadly speaking, a better man.

Undoubtedly, Bruce Gold is the amalgamation of the most pervasive Jewish stereotypes in contemporary society. Through his own words, he represents himself as a money-grubbing, womanizing, self-deprecating man with few scruples to his credit. In essence, he is not the most laudatory or emblematic choice for an author's introduction to the realm of Jewish literature. However, Joseph Heller strategically selects Gold for this novel precisely because he does not espouse the conventional definition of the Jewish Identity. Gold is both malleable and resolute; he does not want to associate as yet another victim of oppression or target for prejudice, but he is also not willing to completely divest from the culture that has been his greatest comfort. Rather than alter his identity to fit within the confines of Jewish or non-Jewish categories, Gold learns to adapt his understanding of Jewishness to suit his personal needs. By the end of the novel, he has effectively redefined the boundaries of Jewish culture through his discerning appropriation of its language and cuisine.

Conclusion:

As my thesis nears its completion, I look back on this work and marvel at how vastly different the end product is compared to my initial conception. Although both Heller and scholars of his work make mention of a literary connection between the author and James Joyce, there remains no clear evidence to suggest a specific mimesis or re-visioning of Joyce's texts. For that matter, Heller's texts seem always just shy of a direct, unmistakable relationship with several key authors in the canon, such as Joyce, Malamud, and Roth, despite their ostensible similarities. Rather, these authors act as unitary figures of an entire society of authors whose massively celebrated works haunt Heller's consciousness more so than individual writers. Heller's texts respond to an established understanding of creative artistry and authentic ethnicity, which predecessor works perpetuate. Though Heller's novels all focus on rather distinctive topics, each book returns to the idea of community and the protagonist's place within a particular social realm.

For Heller the author, the invocation of a canonical, authorial community allows him to re-imagine his own legacy as a writer in the latter half of the twentieth century. At a time when the postmodern aesthetic of pastiche and constructive reuse flourishes, Heller's writing style bears more value because of its focus on repetition and narrative recycling rather than in spite of it. Heller specifically mentions the way in which his critics compare him to his predecessors in order to establish the connection between them, but his intent is not to acknowledge their critique. Instead, Heller presents a vision of the canonical community to illustrate the fluidity of its boundaries. Though his critics consider him an outsider of this authorial class, he demonstrates he can redefine the class to grant himself the status of insider. Through this process of redefinition and reevaluation, Heller comes to terms with his own anxieties as an

author and shows that he, and authors like him, share their fears and devastations with an expansive host of great writers.

Similarly, Heller also asks his audience to reexamine his relationship to an ethnocentric, Jewish American community of writers through his later texts. While his personal history may raise questions regarding his authority on Jewish culture, *Good as Gold* and *God Knows* argue that the boundaries of an ethnicity are unrepresentative of its people and, thus, remain flexible, allowing members to readjust some boundaries in order to accommodate their own inclusion. By negating the most controversial boundaries of Jewishness, such as language and religious devotion, Heller provides secular Jewish American writers with a way to acknowledge their ethnic background without feeling consumed by it.

While I initially sought out the evidence that would identify Joyce as Heller's model in writing, I eventually discovered that such evidence exists only in fragments – in snippets from interviews, in passing remarks from other Heller scholars, in minor parallels buried within Heller's texts. Joyce is not an overarching model for any of Heller's writings. He is not Heller's greatest influence, and that is his point. His last novel, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, illustrates how the anxiety of influence can haunt the authorial consciousness of successive, postmodern writers, but it also serves as Heller's way of distancing himself from that influence. Heller's connection to Joyce mirrors the kind of influence Joyce has had on many post-World War II writers: Joyce's innovative approach to narrative development and ethnic characterization opens up new possibilities for his successors but does not determine them. Throughout his texts, particularly through his *Portrait*, Heller looks for ways to destabilize preconceived notions of community boundaries in order to encourage readers to reevaluate his work based on his (re)definition of his literature.

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