

KATARZYNA HAUZER

The Politics of Deception in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*

Joseph Heller's long-awaited second novel was released thirteen years after the publication of all-time famous *Catch-22*. In numerous interviews the writer admitted that he had had his idea for *Something Happened* only a year after the completion of his first novel. Five years later, in 1966, the first section of work in progress called "Something Happened" was published in the September issue of the *Esquire* magazine. The novel was not completed until the fall of 1974, being delayed by Heller's script-writing, political activities and above all the production of the play *We Bombed in New Haven* which caused a two-year interruption to his writing. Eventually, the new book turned out to be so unlike Heller's first novel that it perplexed, puzzled and disappointed many reviewers. *Playboy* called it the worst thing a writing giant can do to his loyal readers (Sorkin 145). George J. Searles, who noted that the book had the quality of being spoken rather than written, characterized its protagonist's language, a stream of neurosis, in negative terms as flat, ordinary, and unexciting (qtd. in Tucker 329). Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., writing in *The New York Times Book Review* on October 6, 1974, summed up some of the central problems Heller's novel posed for its critics. In *Something Happened* the main character, Bob Slocum, appears to be – as Vonnegut says – "morally repellent and socially useless; evidently it is his wish that we dislike him. And we gratify that wish" (qtd. in Klemtner 550). Furthermore, the book "is so astonishingly pessimistic that it can be called a daring experiment . . . Joseph Heller is the first major American writer to deal with

unrelieved misery at novel length" (Klemtner 550). The final comment of Heller's fellow writer appeared to be more favorable if not encouraging and so, not before long, nearly three quarters of the critics viewed Heller's narrative in positive if not enthusiastic terms. The headline in *Los Angeles Times* referred to it as "An Extraordinary Novel About an Ordinary Man" (Sorkin 139). Kenneth Tynan from *Observer* drew a parallel between Heller's two bestsellers when he wrote: "It was the madness of war that prompted the magnificent lunacy of *Catch 22*; it is the malaise of modern America which inspires *Something Happened* – a book as stunning and as splendidly original as its predecessor."¹

Heller's second novel demonstrates an abrupt departure from the political themes of *Catch-22* and *Good As Gold* whose protagonists were entangled in the drolleries of propagandistic actions so reminiscent of McCarthy's and Kissinger's eras respectively. Nonpolitical in nature, *Something Happened* takes place largely within the offices of a giant corporation and portrays the corporate world as dangerous to the integrity of the individual. Over five hundred pages of narrative focus on Bob Slocum, a sad, lackluster careerist with no true friends, dogged by a feeling of always being trapped by the sneaky office politics. This article is an attempt to examine Heller's portrayal of the American business community and its propaganda, in which fear and anxiety play a major role. The deceptive techniques stemming from the corporate grounds start to dominate Slocum's family communication, which, in turn, draws our attention to the middle-class upward mobility theme that embodies Heller's pessimistic views about the pernicious effects of prosperity.

Business Environment

In most of Heller's novels the narrational "I" has a habit of becoming the author himself. Just as *Catch-22* and *Good As Gold* both had biographical elements, Heller's new character, 43-year-old business executive Bob Slocum – his name subsequently changed from Joe into Bob to avoid confusion with the author's own first name – reflects the writer's postwar

¹ See backcover of *Something Happened*. All subsequent references are to this edition and are noted parenthetically.

experiences, when Heller began a successful career in several advertising departments. For his sketch of Slocum's company the novelist seems to have drawn on his own business undertakings in at least two different companies. A young graduate from Columbia University, Heller first worked in New York City as advertising copywriter at *Remington Rand* (1952–5), advertising-promotion copywriter for *Time* magazine (1955–8), advertising-promotion writer for *Look* magazine (a one-year job), and as copywriter and promotion manager for *McCall's* magazine (1959–62). Often asked about the model of a company, as described in the novel, Heller mentioned Time Inc. While working for *Time* and *McCall's* as a presentation writer Heller would mount slide and film shows to demonstrate promotional techniques and gave one such a demonstration at the 1961 sales convention in Nassau. At *Remington Rand* his duties consisted of "writing and supervising the production of advertising and sales promotion material" (Seed 100). Coincidentally, this is exactly the sort of activity Slocum wishes to do at his annual convention and in the first version of the novel's opening Heller retained Nassau as the location of such a convention (it was subsequently altered to Florida). Altogether, during the composition of *Something Happened* (as was the case with *Catch-22*) the author revised facts and names thoroughly so that the autobiographical parallels would be reduced.

Since the company as well as its end-product remain unnamed in *Something Happened*, the reader's attention is directed to the company's internal procedures. Its propaganda is synonymous with what is called "deceitful communication." Set up in an environment of a systematic use of irrational and very often unethical techniques of persuasion, its employees are influenced into believing whatever the company wants them to believe in. In contrast to Yossarian, who ultimately rejects any deals that force him to collaborate with cynical leaders of *Catch-22*, Bob Slocum learns to play the power games, accepting all the hypocrisies, treacheries and unremitting anxieties. Accordingly, as the company favors salesmen "who are aggressive, egotistical and individualistic by nature" (27) and its predetermined goal is to encourage competitiveness, Slocum's struggle for power seems to be his only objective. His ambition as a "desire to perform a role whose significance is defined internally, within the politics of the company" (Seed 100) makes him a true "organization man." His stance appears to coincide with Bruce Gold's logic, an

aspiring White House consultant from Heller's third novel, who lives by the slogan: "the only responsibility in office is to stay in office." The work of "selling selling," as Slocum phrases it in an explanation to his nine-year-old son, is – in Elizabeth Long's words – "so routinized that process has completely eclipsed product, leaving only the struggle for . . . position to motivate and satisfy" (qtd. in Seed 100).

The pressure to stay in the office is even greater since, as we are told, the corporation is fully capable of doing without its own personnel. The protagonist-narrator says: "As far as the company is concerned, no one needs anyone. It goes on by itself. It doesn't need us. We need it" (419). Slocum is accountable for his actions to his superior Green, who – as Heller tells the reader – "is more important to [him] than god" (210). It is Green who instructs the co-worker about the company's key policy which comes down to calculated deception in the form of exploitative lying. In one of the Green-Slocum dialogs Heller depicts it clearly:

"Don't lie to me unconvincingly," [Green] begins almost before I finish, as though he can anticipate my replies. "It's all right to lie if I don't suspect you. I'm your boss. Don't lie to anyone around here unconvincingly if you want to keep working for me." (410)

The frequent occurrences of "lying passages" in Heller's *Something Happened* coincide with the propagandistic techniques ridiculed in his two other novels. Following the pattern of the bureaucratic absurdities of *Catch-22* and *Good As Gold*, the characters of *Something Happened* disseminate the same lies and half-truths. Inevitably, they all seem to fall victim to the treacheries of their own carefully-acquired propagandistic skills of what is to be known as informative advertising. In one of the most significant scenes of *Something Happened* the main protagonist boasts about his propagandistic abilities to convert whole truths into half truths and half truths into whole truths:

I am very good with these techniques of deception, although I am not always able anymore to deceive myself (if I would not know that, would I? ha, ha). In fact, I am continually astonished by people in the company who do fall victim to their own (our own) propaganda. . . . Every time we launch a new advertising campaign, for example, people inside the company are the first ones to be taken in by it. Every time we introduce a new product, or an

old product with a different cover, color, and name that we present as new, people inside the company are the first to rush to buy it – even when it's no good. (29)

When salesmen and company spokesmen begin believing their own arguments, the result is, as Heller tells the reader, “not always bad, for they develop an outlook of loyalty, zeal, and conviction that is often remarkably persuasive in itself” (29). Indeed, more than anything, Slocum's company seems to thrive on images, impressions and outlooks. The techniques of the external propaganda of advertising (which is, if not wholly untruthful, at any rate designed to create false impressions) are used in the company's internal politics and the company's procedures of deception result in an overwhelming feeling of distrust and awe. On a much lesser scale than was the case with *Catch-22*, the characters of *Something Happened*, too, radiate uneasiness. In fact, fear and anxiety seem to be the focal point of all Heller's writings. Where Bruce Gold in Heller's “White House” novel is haunted by the feeling that nothing succeeds as planned, the business people of *Something Happened* are trapped, anxious about their fortune, in a similarly closed system. In one of the passages, Heller says: “When salesmen are doing well, there is pressure upon them to begin doing better, for fear they may start doing worse” (26).

A number of other closed systems, joined by an element of fear, can be found in the novel. Heller's narrative is composed almost entirely of Slocum's paranoid interior monolog. At some point in the novel, a parallel is drawn between the business reality and Slocum's family life. In the business passage Heller features the protagonist as saying: “In my department there are six people who are afraid of me, and one small secretary who is afraid of all of us. I have one other person working for me who is not afraid of anyone, not even me, and I would fire him quickly, but I'm afraid of him” (17). Further in the novel similar reasoning is transformed onto the grounds of family reality: “In the family in which I live there are four people of whom I am afraid. Three of these four people are afraid of me, and each of these three is also afraid of the other two. Only one member of the family is not afraid of any of the others, and that one is an idiot” (355).

Family Environment

The deceitful communication as disseminated by Slocum's company affects or distorts the protagonist's relations with the members of his family. A day-to-day exposure to the company's propaganda influences Slocum's out-of-office behavior. With the members of his family he repeats the same patterns that he criticizes at work. Yet it is the corporate reality that Slocum finds more comfortable, rewarding and altogether more opportune. In *Something Happened*, Heller says, "the family is a counterpart of company [and] the company is more comfortable for Slocum because his status is defined and relationships are defined, whereas family relationships – unpredictable and painful – are more oppressive to him" (qtd. in Sorkin 246).

The greatest source of anguish are Slocum's children. His disagreeable and contentious daughter is for him only a subject to outfox. The deception factor cripples almost every conversation the father has with his adolescent interlocutor. In Tucker's terms, Slocum's "war of words" (336) results in the protagonist's never-ending efforts to outwit his daughter in argument as well as embarrass and defeat her in debate. Paradoxically enough, more than any other character in the novel, it is Slocum's nine-year-old son who appeals to the reader. Of almost all the others, the little boy is the least susceptible to the works of propaganda. Innocent, sensitive, and somewhat naïve, he recoils from any competitiveness the purpose of which, as he is taught at school, is to outsmart and outdo everybody at everything. The "bandwagon," a popular "join the crowd" propagandistic technique, is reinforced upon him by a fearsome gym teacher. Mr. Forgione torments Slocum's son by persuading him to take a course of action everyone else is taking as he strongly believes that people's natural desire is to be on the winning side. A good runner, Slocum's boy continuously tries to lose races so that he may race to the finish line with his opponents. When winning the competition at school, he always starts laughing and slows down so as to let other runners catch up. The evident resistance to the "bandwagon" pattern, the righteousness of which is so strongly inculcated in Slocum's son by Forgione, is a true outrage to the teacher. In one of the scenes in the novel he addresses his dissatisfaction with the boy's behavior at Slocum the father:

"He doesn't have a good competitive spirit," Forgione asserts to me complainingly. "He lacks a true will to win."

"I don't have one, either, Mr. Forgione," I reply to him tamely, in an effort to get on his good side. "Maybe he gets it from me."

"That can't be true, Mr. Slocum," Forgione says. "Everybody's got competitive spirit."

"Then why doesn't he?"

"That's what I mean," says Forgione.

(218)

If Forgione is an ardent propagandist, Slocum is an even greater one. A shrewd business executive, he learns the tricks of his trade by practicing on his own family, friends as well as strangers. Soon he discovers that propaganda is his only way of communication. Slocum's gradual self-awareness makes him see through the nature of company success and he finally realizes that his self-willed climb to power is a road to self-destruction. In one of the interviews, referring to his protagonist, Heller makes a generalized comment on the decline of American life:

The struggle of what to do with yourself after the war is more complicated for somebody like Slocum. . . . It's the end of what other people have called the American Dream, the waste lands that await the person who succeeds. Affluence combined with leisure does seem to produce clinical neurosis in a great many Americans. (Sorkin 184)

"America the Beautiful" Isn't Or What Happened to the American Dream

If Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and *Good As Gold* were his tales about horrors of war and political propaganda, *Something Happened* depicts the horrors of peace and consumerism. At one point in the novel Heller's protagonist says: "It was after the war, I think, that the struggle really began" (520). Upward mobility is a process which Slocum feels trapped into accepting. Not only does he condition his land property on his salary and business status, but he bluffs himself into liking golf which he now plays "with a much better class of people" (568) and registers himself as Republican who "nearly always votes Democratic sneakily" (510). His wife, not unlike himself, is susceptible to all the hypocrisies of "Class A suburban-

ities," and, as Heller tells us, is "a devout and cheerful Congregationalist because the building is airy and the people friendlier than Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians she has gotten to know since [they] moved from the city to Connecticut" (510).

The local hypocrisies and deceptions, as exercised by Slocum and his family, stimulate an outburst of Heller's comments on the decline of American life. Slocum's predicament seems to coincide with that of the writer himself whose mimicry of glittering generalities illustrates his disillusion with American ideals. All highly valued concepts and beliefs, such as love of country, desire for peace, freedom, glory, honor, etc., are ridiculed in Slocum's "revision" of the following emotionally appealing verses. Katherine Lee Bates "America the Beautiful" begins:

O beautiful for spacious skies,
 For amber waves of grain,
 For purple mountain majesties
 Above the fruited plain!
 America! America!
 God shed his grace on thee
 And crown thy good with brotherhood
 From sea to shining sea!

(Van Wienen 41)

Bob Slocum's "America the Beautiful Isn't" reads:

From sea to shining sea the country is filling with slag, shale and used-up automobile tires. The fruited plain is coated with insecticide and chemical fertilizers. Even pure horseshit is hard to come by these days. They add preservatives. You don't find fish in lakes and rivers anymore. You have to catch them in cans. Towns die. Oil spills. Money talks. God listens. God is good, a real team player. America the Beautiful isn't. . . . Depreciating motels, junked automobiles, and quick-food joints grow like amber waves of grains.

(483-4)

Slocum's up-to-date version blocks every positive image of Bates' patriotic poem. At the end of the novel the protagonist's sarcastic remarks express his method for keeping going as he gradually becomes more and more unenthusiastic about living in such a warped reality. His well-cherished dictum is a harbinger of what Bruce Gold will state in Heller's third novel. Where Gold resorts to Henry Kissinger's famous slo-

gan: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac," Bob Slocum confides: "Apathy, boredom, restlessness, free-floating, amorphous frustration, leisure, discontent at home or at my job – these are my aphrodisiacs now" (385).

In general view, Heller's novel is a pessimistic reflection on contemporary American ills. The book is permeated with examples of linguistic and situational traps of propaganda which is to be viewed here as deceitful communication. The title *Something Happened* makes an ironic comment on the uneventful nature of Slocum's life who – trained to be a professional opinionmonger – uses any tactic necessary to manipulate his wife, children, and friends, trying to keep any human relations at a distance, which altogether results in his unhappiness, frustration, apathy and alienation. As a representative of American middle-class society, Heller's protagonist falls victim to such concepts as staunch careerism, upward mobility and unattainable success – all being themes that reflect the writer's comments on the inauthenticity and thus decline of American life. In *Something Happened* Bob Slocum seems to be voicing Heller's own most revealing thoughts one of which is that "America the Beautiful" isn't.

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