

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN JOSEPH HELLER'S KISSINGER NOVEL

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Despite never-fading interest in the study of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, little attention has been paid to his other writings. An author of six novels, two plays and two screenplays, Heller never outwon his "one-book author" syndrome and *Catch-22*, his first and all-time best work, achieved nearly sacred status in the decades following its publication. Throughout his career reviewers seem to be perplexed and disappointed in Heller's succeeding works, whatever their merits, for not being exemplary comic novels his first novel proved to be. Stylistically and structurally avant-garde, two subsequent novels – *Something Happened* and *Good As Gold* – according to James Walter Miller, "differ so radically from [*Catch-22* – K.H.], they could have been written by two other innovators."¹ Yet, all of them a frighteningly accurate portrait of propaganda as a form of communication, Heller's novels expose similar themes; the violent absurdities of American commercial, military and political institutions. One of the world's most revered writers, Heller gets, as critics point out, "history and humor to work hand in hand".²

Presidency and the White House, as the ideological symbols of American power, the personification of government, as the center of bureaucratic activity and propaganda-ridden discourse, come up for ridicule in Heller's *Good As Gold*. A true political satire, the third-in-the-row novel, published in 1979, represents, as David Seed has it, "an updated variation on the bureaucracy of Heller's first novel and displays just as many idiocies."³ It was already in the 1960s that the writer intended to incorporate real-life names into his work. Yet in *Catch-22*, a satire against the 1950s excesses and evils of McCarthyism, no political celebrities were castigated by name.⁴ Heller's "Kissinger novel" adopts a different method to expose the irrationalities of the gigantic organization. *Good As Gold* pictures Heller's "unrivaled,"⁵ savage criticism of the U.S. government and the whole 1970s political mix-up. The book introduces specifically identified figures and most of its direct references take the form of verbatim quotations of newspaper pieces. Continually at odds with the American

¹ J.W. Miller, "Joseph Heller's Fiction" [in:] *American Writing Today*, vol. 1, (ed.) R. Kostelanetz, Forum Series, 1982, p. 237.

² Ibidem, p. 237.

³ D. Seed, *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1989, p. 129; hereafter D. Seed.

⁴ For an extensive analysis of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in terms of McCarthyism see J. Robertson, "They're After Everyone: Heller's *Catch-22* and the Cold War" [in:] *Clio*, vol. 19, fall 1989 as well as Katarzyna Hauzer, "Maccartyzm w *Paragrafie 22* Josepha Hellera" [in:] *Szkice o literaturze i kulturze amerykańskiej*, (ed.) T. Pyzik, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2001.

⁵ Ch. Flippo, "Checking in with Joseph Heller" [in:] *Conversations with Joseph Heller*, (ed.) A.J. Sorkin, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 1992, p. 224.

line of politics, Heller makes his novel only supposedly concern the "Jewish experience." Replete with scandalous, corrupt and inefficient governmental propaganda, the novel is a ferocious and intense comment on Henry Kissinger, Nixon's Administration, and the White House politics.

In *Good As Gold* the reader is introduced to two worlds: political ambitions of Bruce Gold, a product of Heller's imagination, and a group of Nixon White House heroes and villains to whom Jewish Professor Gold both aspires and whom he considers incompetent and pathetic. Walter James Miller refers to Heller's main protagonist as "an original study of the way a citizen may choose a national celebrity as his model success."⁶ Bruce Gold is determined to "out-Kissinger" Kissinger and with such a purpose in mind he collects newspaper clippings on America's diplomatic statesmanship. All throughout the book the reader is exposed to a great number of real-life political celebrities, such as: President Richard M. Nixon, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, CIA director Richard Helms, and others.

Both *Good As Gold* and its predecessor exemplify a quality located by Malcolm Bradbury as being characteristic of the 1960s American fiction which "becomes fantastic through its assaults on the historical and the real."⁷ Just as much *Catch-22* reflected on the propagandistic techniques of the McCarthy era, *Good As Gold* reveals communication patterns so characteristic of the Kissinger White House. Heller's work is to be viewed here as a comment on communication in which propaganda plays a significant part. Family communication and New York environment, deprived of any political propaganda, serve here as a pure introduction to the complexities of political communication of Heller's White House. Thus, in trying to find a way out of the twisted conversational logic of his family, Heller's protagonist is thrown into yet another verbal dimension and that is the one of Washington, D.C. Through Gold's sloganized ideas Heller ridicules Kissinger's and Nixon's diplomatic verbiage. In the figure of Ralph Newsome, Gold's White House connection, we are reminded of Nixon's Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler whose rhetorical strategies amounted to what press corps called "zieglerism." Finally, most effective is Heller's depiction of Gold being caught in little secrecies and a bureaucratic snarl so reminiscent of the Kissinger era.

1.

In *Good As Gold*, Heller's protagonist seems to be geographically and linguistically confused. Jewish Professor Bruce Gold struggles a double life wavering between two contexts; Washington, D.C. – the land of political future possibilities – and here-and-now his native New York where he lives with his family which truly detests him. The two settings are governed by different modes of linguistic communication. David Seed points it out when he writes: "The discontinuity between Gold's different verbal registers is part of a much bigger discontinuity between the different areas he

⁶ J.W. Miller, p. 244.

⁷ After: D. Seed, p.129.

inhabits."⁸ Gold's communication with the members of the family works in accordance to catch-22 principle. Whether he makes a point of his own, welcomes somebody else's opinion or withdraws from a discussion completely, he is at a loss. Most often, as a participant in family discussions, Gold renders himself vulnerable to mockery especially on the part of his father, mother-in-law and brother Sid. When Sid misquotes from Alexander Pope, Gold finds himself trapped in one of those verbal games which he constantly loses:

'Behold a child,' Sid intoned rabbinically without warning (...), 'by nature's kindly law, pleased by a rattle, tickled by a straw.'

Gold saw in a flash that he was totally ruined. It was check mate, match, and defeat from the opening move. He was caught, whether he took the bait or declined, and he could only marvel in dejection as the rest of the stratagem unfolded around him as symmetrically and harmoniously as ripples in water (...).

Gold was trapped two, three, four, maybe five or six ways. If he mentioned Alexander Pope, he would be parading his knowledge. If he didn't, Sid would, unmasking him as an ignoramus. If he corrected the prepositional errors, he would appear pedantic, quarrelsome, jealous. If he gave no answer at all, he would be insulting to Ida, who, with the others, was awaiting some reply. It was no fair way, he sulked, to treat a middle-aged, Phi Beta Kappa, cum laude graduate of Columbia who was a doctor of philosophy and had recently been honored with praise from the White House and the promise of consideration for a high-level position. Oh, Sid, you fucking cocksucker, lamented the doctor of philosophy and prospective governmental appointee. You nailed me again.⁹

With his father, who is an even greater joker at Gold's expense, Heller's protagonist has similarly absurd verbal exchanges. At every family meeting Julius Gold engages in a tactic of contradiction for the mere purpose of belittling his younger son or humiliating the whole family. In the following scene Gold comes up with an idea of going to a local fish restaurant:

'Let's go to Lundy's,' he suggested. 'It's right here. We'll have a good piece of fish.'

'What's so good about it?' said his father.

'So' – Gold declined to argue – 'it won't be so good.'

'Why you getting me fish that's no good?'

'Black,' said Gold.

'White,' said his father.

'White,' said Gold.

'Black,' said his father.

'Cold.'

'Warm.'

'Tall.'

'Short.'

'Short.'

'Tall.'

'I'm glad,' said Gold, 'you remember your game.'

'Who says it's a game?' (98)

⁸ D. Seed, p. 138.

⁹ J. Heller, *Good As Gold*, Black Swan, London 1993, pp. 37–38. Page numbers for all further citations will be included parenthetically in the text.

Paradoxically enough, many of the conversations between Gold and his father revolve around their efforts both not to let the communication die and, at the same time, to have their way, no matter what it takes. Seed sums up Heller's stylizing of the Golds' language in the above mentioned sequence as he writes:

Although Heller took care not to repeat the comic methods of *Catch-22* this exchange would stand comparison with some of the dialogues in the earlier novel and with the verbal sparring in *Something Happened*. It is absolutely typical in forcing Gold on to the defensive; even his decision not to argue backfires on him. Following out his simple rule of contradiction his father outmanoeuvres Gold whether the latter uses the same verbal counters or not. And he even refuses the apparently innocuous proposition that the exchange is a game. To do so would be agreeing a common level of seriousness, a complicity (to play together), and would also be stopping the game. By not agreeing on the rules Gold's father keeps his son at a permanent disadvantage since it is impossible to break out of the circle of contradictions. The exchange can never end; it will simply go on and on for ever with only temporary intervals.¹⁰

Many other argumentation fallacies are employed in Gold's father's speech. Not only does he thrive on circles of contradictions, as pointed out by Seed, but he evidently encourages circular reasoning. The popular technique is based on circular arguments which make use of the capacity of the language to say a thing in many different ways, ending where they began and beginning where they end. Thus in yet another house talk Gold is reprimended by his father:

'Consider,' Sid boomed suddenly out to all the others in the commanding ululations of an Elijah, after inciting in Gold a sense of onrushing crisis by the rather brooding manner in which he had first brought the subject to his ear. 'The lillies of the fields.' Gold's mind was reeling. 'They don't toil and they don't spin. Yet nature, or God, sees to it that they have enough to eat and grow every year, and every year they bloom.' (...)

'A very nice thought,' rejoiced Gold's father. 'From my favorite son.'

'And the Bible too,' Gold muttered viciously. 'And it's wrong.'

'How can it be wrong if it's from the Bible?'

'Sid's wrong, not the Bible.'

'And he don't even believe in God,' Gold's father retaliated by addressing the others with a snort of ridicule. 'Hey, dummy, if there's no God, Mr Smart Guy Politician, how can there be a Bible?'

'You should listen to your father more,' counseled Gold's stepmother. 'And maybe you can be his favorite son too' (315).

The repetition of the same conversational strategies is accompanied by a set of cynical truths in the form of home-made slogans which Gold's father keeps thrusting on Gold: "it's not what you know; it's who you know" (34), "the man who does the paying calls the tune" (110), "money talks" (110), "it is not the value of a dollar [that counts—K.H.], but the value of a *thousand* dollars" (36), "Jews don't get divorces" (185), etc. Overflooded with the catchy phrases of his father, Heller's protagonist begins to work on some of his own which are to serve him a larger purpose. Soon his sloganized ideas get him to the so-longed-for Washington.

¹⁰ D. Seed, p. 132.

2.

The political hopes of Heller's protagonist are his ambitions to break away from the marginality in his family. He tries to outdistance himself from his tyrannical father who is constantly questioning Gold's success, sadistically forcing his son to place himself on a vertical social scale. Confused, unhappy, and somewhat naive, Gold persists in believing that he is fitted to high office. Heller creates two voices within Gold to express his recurring conflicting impulses once the prospect of a political career is within sight:

A voice inside cautioned, *Zei nisht naarish* [don't be stupid]. Where does someone like you come off being Secretary of State? What's so crazy? He answered it brashly. It's happened to bigger *schmucks* than me (130).

Heller's allusion to a Secretary of State is a caustic reference to Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State under the President Richard M. Nixon administration, whose political success is commonly viewed as one of the most glittering upward climbs in American public service. The paradigm of Gold's steps toward Washington seems to blend with Kissinger's political path. Like U.S. Secretary, Jewish Professor Gold is a lecturer at the university, writes a book which pleases the White House and serves as an unnamed policy adviser. His social climb is repeatedly pictured in Heller's metaphor of running. Gold's jogging on the tracks of his local YMCA may relate, as Seed points out, to Heller's oblique allusion to Bud Schulberg's 1941 novel *What Makes Sammy Run?*¹¹ Significantly enough, during Kissinger years, the title of the narrative of financial success where the protagonist Sammy Glick sets his sights firmly on Hollywood, was incorporated in political parlance. Washington's most popular parlor game – What Makes Henry Run? – in the wake of the Watergate trauma earned yet another re-phrasing: How Long Will Henry Stay?¹²

Kissinger's own most celebrated diagnosis of a success was embodied in the slogan: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac." In *Good As Gold* the reader is bombarded by chapter-to-chapter sloganeering, most of it a produce of Bruce Gold. Heller's protagonist is trapped in the language of brief striking phrases that have always been intimate constituents of the political discourse. The novel is organized around self-perpetuating slogans; a phrase is extruded from the last chapter and leads off the next chapter. Thus we have: "Every Change Is for the Worse," "Nothing Succeeds as Planned," "Education and Truth or Truth in Education," "Invite a Jew to the White House (and You Make Him Your Slave)," "We Are Not a Society or We Are Not Worth Our Salt." The punchy phrases for which Gold has an unquestionable gift are very much welcomed by Bruce's colleague Ralph Newsome, the presidential aide in the novel, who "has a penchant for turning the most simple things into insanity."¹³ The White House parlance comes up for ridicule in Heller's depiction of the telephone conversation between the two friends:

'It looks good, Bruce (...). You're really bogging my mind the way you're bogging everyone's mind with those phrases of yours. First "contemporary universal constituency"

¹¹ D. Seed, p. 140.

¹² M. Kalb and B. Kalb, *Kissinger*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., New York 1975, p. 621; hereafter *Kissinger*.

¹³ M. Brooks, "Mel Brooks Meets Joseph Heller" [in:] *Conversations...*, p. 202.

and now this "you're boggling my mind." I tried it out on a couple of people and it boggled their minds. We all feel it would be a good idea to start using you here as quickly as possible if we decide we want to use you at all' (54).

Many other Heller's characters get entangled in the linguistic complexities all for the purpose of evoking in the reader a feeling of an omnipresent, almost nonsensical, communication. One of Heller's personal favorites in the novel, Texas governor Pugh Biddle Conover, produces so many truisms that it is hard to get through the clutter of his talk. Whenever possible, his conversations are larded with such chants as: "Silver and gold may fritter away, but a good education will never decay" (244), "There are gold ships and silver ships but the best ship is friendship" (245), and "Old truths are the best truths" (245). The crazy rhymes, for all their comedy, seem to dramatize Heller's stated view that "those qualities which are important in achieving public power have little to do with creative intelligence."¹⁴ In an interview with Mel Brooks Heller reveals the source of his inspiration: "I went back to my elementary school album for those rhymes. '2 Ys U R, 2 Ys U B, I C U R 2 Ys 4 Me.' Or 'Learn this, my boy, before you grow old, that learning is better than silver or gold.' Pugh Biddle Conover is one of my favorite characters in the book."¹⁵ Heller's second choice is Ralph Newsome whose rhetorical strategies introduce the reader to the world of Nixon's Press Secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, and the language of the 1970s media which continued to follow the Nixon administration into some empty slogans. The White House tricky articulation of the then-current events soon became to be known as "zieglerism."

3.

In *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller* Melvin J. Friedman shares his views on Heller's third novel with excellent concision: "Gold negotiates three geographies: the university, the family, political Washington, D.C. They are all verbal constructs, with their own special grammars."¹⁶ Certainly, each area of Gold's experience has its characteristic syntax. The family communication relies on various argumentation fallacies, such as circular reasoning, circles of contradiction and oversimplification. At the moments of pressure, Heller presents Gold resorting to Yiddish inversions and vocabulary: "In my mouth to ashes the food is turning" (34). In the world of Washington, Gold is exposed to the syntax which is to symbolize the double talk of the public officials. "All of us," a White House aide tells Gold, "want you working with us as soon as possible after the people above us decide whether they want you working here at all" (55). He is said to "do whatever you want as long as you do whatever we want" (201). Time and again he is given confirmations, such as: "This administration will back you all the way until it has to" (201), or "You can have your choice of anything that's open that we're willing to let you have" (123). Soon the double talk starts to pollute Gold's own thoughts. In one of the scenes the governmental appointee boasts about the prospect of his political career addressing his

¹⁴ D. Seed, p. 140.

¹⁵ *Conversations...*, p. 203.

¹⁶ After D. Seed, p. 137.

friends in a double talk manner: "I'm going to work for the government, you see. It's absolutely definite now, although I can't be sure" (223).

What attracts Gold most in the world of Washington are verbal promises held out by his former college friend, Ralph Newsome, now the White House press officer. Yet Newsome's words have a habit of slipping through Gold's grasp. In every telephone conversation the two friends have, Gold tries to pin Ralph down to specifics:

'Ralph,' said Gold, with skepticism predominating again over a multitude of other concerns, 'do you ever really see the President?'

'Oh yes, Bruce,' Ralph answered. 'Everybody sees the President.'

'I mean personally. Does he see you?'

'The president sees a great deal, Bruce.'

'Do you ever see him to talk to him?'

'About what?' asked Ralph.

'About anything.'

'Oh, Bruce, you can't just talk to the President about anything,' Ralph chided. 'The President is often very busy. He may be writing another book.'

Gold persisted rationally in the face of a gathering fog of futility.

'Well, Ralph, if you did have something of importance to discuss with the President, could you get in to talk to him?'

'About what?' Ralph asked again.

'About whatever you had that was important – no, don't stop me – like war, for example.'

'That's not my department,' Ralph said. 'That's out of my area.'

'What is your area?'

'Just about everything I cover, Bruce.'

'What do you cover?'

'Everything in my area, Bruce. That's my job' (220–221).

David Seed comments on the following scene as he writes: "Unlike the exchanges within Gold's family where the guiding principle seems to be antagonism, Heller now sets up an opposition between rational enquiry and the voice of political experience."¹⁷ The more Gold insists on hearing some accurate answers, the more easily Ralph slides from meaning to meaning using different linguistic devices. He avoids direct answers by semantic shifts so that his "anything," for instance, becomes a lexical invitation to give an example to the denotation of something of no importance. The answers, as Seed suggests, are always askew of the questions and when Gold finally comes up with a firm example this leads the conversation into complete circularity. Walter Nash sums up Ralph's peculiar verbal facility when he writes: "Ralph's character is nothing that can effectively be described *by* words. It resides *in* words; his soul is a self-adjusting verbal frame-work which is never allowed to pull out of balance."¹⁸ In his eagerness for communication, Heller's character seems to be repeating the rhetorical pattern of *Catch-22*; he blocks off progression and denies any access to information.

These are, as Heller implies, the determinants of real-life Washington. The administrations of the 1970s have carefully controlled and manipulated sessions with the press in a growing preoccupation with secrecy. Joseph C. Spear locates this ten-

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 143.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 144.

dency in the Nixon and Kissinger (i.e. Ziegler) years.¹⁹ The fact that Heller published a news briefing as a preliminary section of the novel in 1976 suggests that Ralph Newsome is based on a specific figure. The fictitious press officer represents Richard M. Nixon's Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler (1918–1996). Ziegler's notorious propaganda (so called "zieglerism") comes up for ridicule in Ralph's verbal agility. In *Good As Gold* Ron Ziegler is repeatedly castigated by name. One of the press briefings with the Secretary breaks down into verbal farce:

[Gold—K.H] arrived for the White House press briefing not a moment too soon and found a place against the wall with an uninterrupted view of the lectern just as the Press Secretary said:

'I have an announcement to make. As you know, this President conducts an open Administration and is committed to total truth.²⁰ In keeping with that policy, I have to announce that I have no announcements to make. Nothing's happened since yesterday.'

There was a dumbfounded pause in the room before a veteran newsman up front asked, 'Nothing?'

'That is correct. There is no news today.'

'No news?'

'No news.'

'Not a thing?'

'Not a thing worth talking about.'

'Is that just for Washington, Ron?' asked a voice at the side. 'Or is that true for the rest of the country as well?'

'Just for Washington. We don't care about the rest of the country.'

'You don't care about the rest of the country?'

'That is correct.'

'Does that mean there'll be nothing in the newspapers about the President?'

'That's right. Unless you want to make a story out of that. Can we move along?'

'This administration has decided to fight inflation by raising prices to lower demand to reduce prices to increase demand and bring back the inflationary high prices we want to lower by reducing demand to increase demand and raise prices. Isn't that pretty much all your present economic policy amounts to?'

'I don't know.'

'Ron, are you sure you don't know or are you merely guessing?'

'I'm absolutely sure I don't know.'

'What are you willing to predict will happen to unemployment and the economy in the short-term period ahead?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know what you would predict?'

'That is correct.'

'Is there anyone in the government who does know?'

'What I would predict?' (...)

'Well, is there anyone in the Administration who does know?'

'What?'

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Possible reference to R.M. Nixon's acceptance speech of 1968: "Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth, to see it like it is and tell it like it is, to find the truth, to speak the truth and to live the truth. That's what we will do."

Internet: <http://www.lovelys.com/sadie/aphorisms/aphspol.html>

'Anything.'

'Would you repeat that question?'

'Anything.'

'Is that a question?'

'Is that an answer?'

'I don't know.'

'I forgot my question.'

'I'll withdraw my answer.' (...)

'Ron, I have to ask you this about the President. Is it that you really don't know or that you don't want to say?'

'I don't know.'

'You mean you don't know if you don't know or not?'

'That is correct.'

'Thank you, Ron' (211–215).

In *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy*, Joseph C. Spear captures Ziegler's tactics and discloses his propagandistic techniques as he writes:

He was a master of Madison Avenue prattle, speaking an impenetrable language peculiar to the advertising trade. He leaned on such terms as *time*, *frame*, *input*, and *program*. Many questions met with such responses as, 'I am completed on what I had to say,' or, 'This is getting to a point which I am not going to discuss beyond what I have said.' He once accused a reporter of 'trying to complexify the situation' and firmly disallowed one query with, 'I won't be responsive to your follow-up question on the original question to which I told you I wouldn't be responsive.'²¹

In the 1970s, in recognition of Ziegler's performances, the press corps coined such terms as "zieglerism" and a verb "to ziegler" as they had encountered numerous incidents of Ziegler's avoidance of specifics or his elaborate reluctance to admit facts. In his *The Price of Power*, Samuel Hersh offers some background information on the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks negotiations. Evidently, during the summit week in Moscow (May 1972), the press was unable to learn which SALT issues were being negotiated. "Ziegler," as Hersh writes, "played his role perfectly, solemnly assuring reporters at various briefings that the talks were 'serious' and 'productive.'²² In Kissinger's biography – in the times of Vietnam peace talks – Ziegler's words are quoted verbatim to demonstrate the vagueness of his performances. On October 25, 1972 Nixon's secretary told newsmen: "President Nixon is confident that we will achieve the right kind of settlement and that is the objective we are shooting for. President Nixon feels that the important thing is to achieve a settlement that will last, not just for the short term but for the long term. He is prepared to take the time that is necessary to achieve that kind of settlement, a settlement that will last."²³

Finally, next to the evasiveness of political language, Heller's novel satirizes the mannerism of making negative statements rather than affirmations, a method so characteristic of Nixon's spokesman. In the manner that seems classically Zieglerian, Heller's protagonist begins his briefing with an oxymoron: "I have to announce that I have no announcements to make" (211). The statement is followed by more nega-

²¹ After D. Seed, p. 145.

²² S.M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, Summit Books, New York 1983, p. 544; hereafter S.M. Hersh.

²³ *Kissinger*, p. 457.

tive declarations: "There is no news today" (211) and a series of "I don't knows." Similarly, the quotation of Heller's press conference, as mentioned on p. 26 ("You remember Henry Kissinger, don't you? What was your opinion of him?") brings to mind Ronald Ziegler's first reaction to Henry Kissinger, which he phrased in a not much different fashion, i.e. in the form of yet another negation: "inappropriately unimpressed."²⁴

Zieglerisms aside, political reporters seem to be the only group to emerge with credit from *Good As Gold*. Heller does not mock the profession; the significant presence of the media in the novel is a mockery of the abundance of press conferences, briefings, and televised addresses to the nation under Nixon's first and second terms. Ironically enough, Heller's cynicism seems to have been shared by the people it was aimed at. Richard M. Nixon's unofficial remark to his Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler two days before resigning the presidency coincides perfectly with Heller's wordplays. Where the writer resorts to the humorous oxymoron: "I have to announce that I have no announcements to make" (211), Nixon shows an evidence of his wit when he shares his jocular informality with his associate: "One thing, Ron, old boy. We won't have to have any more press conferences, and we won't even have to tell them that either!"²⁵

4.

The bitter comedy of *Good As Gold*, unified by verbal and political motifs with frequent appearances of real-life celebrities whom Heller castigates by name, almost centers on the legendary figure of Henry A. Kissinger. Originally, the statesman was planned to be introduced as a "minor figure of no importance."²⁶ In the event Kissinger grew into a major figure, partly perhaps – as Seed has it – under the impetus of Heller's distaste for the diplomat.²⁷ In 1984 the writer declared: "I would think the antipathy I had towards him, and a great deal of contempt, was shared by every man of conscience and intelligence."²⁸ In another interview from 1986, "Usually I Don't Want to Be Too Funny," Heller's all-out attack is even more recognizable. He says: "Henry Kissinger in *Good As Gold* is only interesting to me as a subject to insult."²⁹

Controversial as he is, Henry A. Kissinger (b. 1923) emerged from the relative obscurity of a Harvard professorship to become one of the most celebrated diplomats in American history. Next to Heller's "schmuck," "shonda" and other Yiddish invectives he has been commonly described in such terms as the "second most powerful man in the world," "conscience of the Administration," "official apologist," "compassionate hawk," "vigilant dove," "Dr. Strangelove," "household word," "the playboy of the Western Wing," "Nixon's Metternich," "Nixon's secret agent," "the Professident of the United States," "Jackie Onassis of the Nixon Administration,"

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 35.

²⁵ Internet, <http://www.bartleby.com/63/73/8273.html>

²⁶ D. Seed, p. 147.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ D.L. Middleton, "Usually I Don't Want to Be Too Funny" [in:] *Conversations...*, p. 272.

"Nobel warrior," "Mideast cyclon," "reluctant wiretapper," "Secretary of the world," and "Super K."

An author of *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957) and *The Necessity for Choice* (1961) – influential studies in which he argued against the "massive retaliation" policy of the then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles – Kissinger served as a foreign-policy adviser to Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1969 the university professor took a leave of absence from Harvard and joined the White House staff as Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs, a post which soon became the center of policy making. The Vietnamization (i.e. gradual withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from South Vietnam) and the President's precedent-breaking state visits to China (as a result of so-called ping-pong diplomacy) and the U.S.S.R. were credited largely to Kissinger's discreet diplomatic maneuvering. Beginning in 1969, Kissinger conducted a series of negotiations with the North Vietnamese, which resulted in a cease-fire in the Vietnam War in early 1973. The same year the American diplomat and North Vietnamese Le Duc Tho shared the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing about the settlement. In October, 1973 Kissinger was appointed Secretary of State and the changeover of presidents did not affect his position. After Nixon's resignation in 1974, he was asked to remain by President Gerald R. Ford.

The Nixon-Kissinger years were filled with a remarkable series of diplomatic triumphs as well as unpardonable scandals. Heller, in his burning criticism of the White House propaganda, depicts the latter. The novel almost centers on authentic newspaper clippings about Henry Kissinger. The collected dossier of cuttings is to serve Heller's protagonist, Bruce Gold, as a background information for his novel. When Gold learns that Secretary of State is writing his memoirs on his own, he privately claims credit for the work as if he were Kissinger's ghost-writer, or even as if, in Seed's words, "he had taken Kissinger's identity on himself."³⁰ Heller writes: "Gold, who'd collected everything by and about Kissinger ever published, could certainly do a better job than Kissinger on a book about Kissinger. For one thing, he had an objective antipathy toward his subject possibly lacking, or weaker, in Kissinger himself" (346). The mere title of the would-be novel, *The Little Prussian*, is meant to empty Kissinger of value and to reflect its subject's reduced stature and crypto-fascism. In *Good As Gold* the reader experiences different stages of Gold's writing process. Undecided about his novel's subject matter, Bruce Gold's initial desire is to write a book about the Jewish experience, hence Heller's title of Section I and the opening sentence: "Gold had been asked many times to write about the Jewish experience in America" (11). Later in the novel the aspiring writer reduces his book to the political themes ("I'm organizing material for a humorous book on David Eisenhower and a serious one on Henry Kissinger, although it may turn out the other way round" (220)). In the last scenes, the gradual confusion takes its toll on Gold. In two subsequent conversations with the Governor and Henry Rosenblatt, he is advised not to waste time on studying people of Kissinger's stature and to give up on his extensive research:

'I'm thinking of writing a book about Henry Kissinger.'

'Why waste time? Nobody's interested any more' (446).

³⁰ D. Seed, p. 149.

And:

'I'm writing a biography of Henry Kissinger.'

'Of who?' asked Harris Rosenblatt.

'Henry Kissinger.'

'Who?'

'Henry Kissinger. He used to be Secretary of State. He's the one who wanted to go down in history like Metternich and Castlereagh.'

'Like who?'

Gold abandoned the project (459–460).³¹

Heller's project, on the other hand, of ridiculing presidential politics and Kissinger's propaganda – even though the writer decided not to do research in Washington and depended on newspaper clippings for his political expertise – is viewed by the *New York Times Book Review* as "perhaps more valuable to our understanding of our government than a library of presidential papers."³² In *Good As Gold* Heller's most distinct references to 1970s political scandals are those to Watergate, Cambodian incursion and wiretapping.

Heller's Watergate accounts refer to the so-called "Nixon tapes," the existence of which was first revealed to staff members of the Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities on July 13, 1973 by Alexander P. Butterfield, a former presidential aide. In *Good As Gold* Heller alludes to the far-famed Nixon tape and the infamous "Saturday-night massacre" of October 20, 1973 when the special Watergate prosecutor and the nation's two top officials lost their jobs within the space of an hour and a half. He writes:

Ai-yi-yi – another *metzieh*, that General Alexander Haig, with his brain of a *golem's*, a *gantsa k'nocker* under Nixon and Kissinger whose *goyisha kup* divined some 'sinister force' behind the erasure of that eighteen and a half minutes from the incriminating Watergate tapes (368–369).

The cause of the bloodshed of the "Saturday-night massacre" was a subpoena that Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox had issued on July 23, 1973 for the recordings of nine presidential conversations, including the one between Nixon and H. R. Haldeman that turned out to have the infamous 18 1/2-minute gap. On the White House refusal to turn over the tapes (due to "executive privilege"), the subpoena was upheld by U.S. District Court Judge John J. Sirica and subsequently by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. When Cox rejected a White House compromise under which an "authenticated summary"³³ of the tapes would be supplied, Nixon – through General Alexander Haig – ordered the Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson to fire Cox. After Richardson's resignation General Haig confronted the Justice Department deputy William D. Ruckelshaus, who also refused to fire the special prose-

³¹ This might be Heller's indirect reference to the well-known slogan "Spiro Who?" of 1968 presidential election when Richard M. Nixon's choice of Governor Spiro T. Agnew of Maryland as his running mate struck the voters and the humorous question "Spiro *who?*" was asked nationwide.

³² Ch. Flippo, "Checking in with Joseph Heller" [in:] *Conversations...*, p. 225.

³² S. and E. Hochman (eds), *The Penguin Dictionary of Contemporary American History. 1945 to the Present*, Penguin Reference Books, New York 1997, p. 475.

³³ *Penguin*, p. 475.

cutor and preferred to resign. The same Haig's instructions were then given to Solicitor General Robert H. Bork, who as Acting Attorney General agreed to fire Cox. The "sinister force," as mentioned by Heller, relates to two more "Saturday-night massacre" proceedings, i.e. the temporary elimination of the office of special prosecutor and the sealing of the offices of Cox, Richardson and Ruckelshaus by FBI as dispatched by Haig.

The changeover of public officials in the Nixon Administration was a common practice. Heller's knowledge on the interdepartmental machinations is largely based on Marvin and Bernard Kalb's biography of Kissinger and the reports of Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein. In the wake of a military intervention in Cambodia (so-called Cambodia "incursion"), on April 28, 1970 Henry Kissinger asked William Watts, member of the National Security Council, to coordinate the Cambodian operation. Watts formally refused telling Kissinger he disapproved of the Cambodian operation. In his office he wrote a letter of resignation getting ready to leave the NSC staff. Having learned of Watts's rebellion, General Haig – Kissinger's deputy – confronted the insubordinate Watts in the Situation Room with the famous remark: "You have an order from your Commander in Chief," implying that Watts could not possibly resign.³⁴ The insights of the Haig-Watts confrontation and their off-the-record language are quoted by Heller in Section VIII:

Gold was indebted to reporters Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein for acquainting him with William Watts, a Kissinger assistant who quit in protest over the invasion of Cambodia:

Watts then had a show-down talk with General Alexander Haig. 'You've just had an order from your Commander in Chief,' Haig said. 'You can't resign.' 'Fuck you, Al,' Watts said. 'I just did.'

Gold was entranced (374).

In Heller's novel the characters are set in a climate of secrecy and distrust. The writer's reiteration of the caution "walls have ears" alludes to a "wiretap phobia" in Kissinger's Washington. Given his mania for secrecy, Kissinger was personally involved in the White House wiretapping program initiated on May 9, 1969 as a result of William Beecher's, the military correspondent for the *New York Times*, one-page publication accurately describing the first of the B-52 secret bombing raids on Cambodia. The wiretapping program included all the journalists whose articles had been "a source of grief"³⁵ to the White House since early 1969. The FBI wiretaps on Pursley, Pederson, Sullivan, and Beecher stayed on until February 10, 1971. Kissinger, in his 1974 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee explained that the four were wiretapped because of their access "to the information, to sensitive information that had leaked."³⁶ In that same testimony Kissinger depicted himself as a passive participant in the decision making, saying that "the idea that this was in any sense illegal simply never crossed [his] mind."³⁷ For Heller there is no doubt as to Kissinger's being "the sneaky man who'd treacherously monitored [Gold's] telephone calls for eight years and cooperated in the illegal tapping of the

³⁴ *Kissinger*, p. 188.

³⁵ S.M. Hersh, p. 194.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

family lines of journalists and aides" (346–347). The FBI involvement and its surveillance policy are parodied in the conversational scene with Gold and Greenspan, alias Bulldog:

'You're vulnerable to blackmail in the interests of a foreign power by anyone who knows all the facts.'

'Who knows all the facts?'

'The FBI knows all the facts.'

'Is the FBI likely to blackmail me in the interests of a foreign power?'

'You pass,' Greenspan said with reluctance and snapped his pad closed. 'Since you're almost a government official, it's almost our duty to protect your life. Call on me for help if you find yourself in danger.'

'How can I reach you?'

'Talk to the wall.' Greenspan went for his gun at Gold's blistering look of reproach.

'Say that again,' dared Gold.

'You can talk to the wall. Here, I'll show you.' Greenspan came zigzagging back with his large, hard head hanging forward and called, 'Testing, one, two, three, four. Do you read me?'

'I read you clearly, Bulldog,' came a voice from his stomach (279).

In an atmosphere of an increasing danger, Gold is tipped off by his White House friend Ralph Newsome about a possible "security check" and the Washington censure politics. Newsome says: "The FBI will be in touch. And from now on, let us see anything new you write before you publish it" (276).

On a word level, Kissinger's and Nixon's propaganda is exploited by Heller in his numerous references to the White House jargon. Heller's characters are laden with a troublesome task of getting a message, if any, out of the White House either overt lying, double talk or simple evasiveness. An aspiring politician, alert as he could be, Gold is able to read between the lines:

Gold had learned in Washington that the CIA was recruiting mercenaries to fight in Africa. He learned this at breakfast from his morning newspaper when he read:

CIA DENIES RECRUITING MERCENARIES TO FIGHT IN AFRICA (204–205)

Kissinger's double talk, derived from his obsession with keeping the citizenry as well as his own Administration colleagues in the dark about his true political beliefs, is displayed in Heller's other passage:

Thus, while the White House regarded him as a wholehearted supporter of the Christmas bombing of North Vietnam, he led reporters and legislators – by nods and grimaces, by innuendo against Nixon, and by stressing the human catastrophe of the decision – to believe that he was opposed to it.

Twisting and turning like a worm or a snake, the *vontz* was *nisht abeyn, nisht aber* on issues igniting the fiercest controversy. The *chuchem but gezugt*:

I have always considered the U.S. involvement in Indochina to have been a disaster.

And *er but gezugt*:

No, I have never been against the war in Vietnam (369).

In an interview with Oriana Fallaci on November 4, 1972, Kissinger resorts to yet another propagandistic technique, a now-legendary "cowboy" metaphor. In the 1970s the intensely emotionally appealing image drew him an even greater audience of supporters. In *Good As Gold*, quite on the contrary, Kissinger's unshakable faith in his lonesome mission is quoted verbatim only to be, on a number of times, sneered

at by Gold's father. When Fallaci asked Kissinger to explain his immense popularity, the politician's response was to create an international sensation:

The main point stems from the fact that I've always acted alone. Americans admire that enormously. Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse, the cowboy entering the village or city alone on his horse. Without even a pistol, maybe, because he doesn't go in for shooting. He acts, that's all: aiming at the right spot at the right time. A Wild West tale, if you like.³⁸

For Heller, the "lonesome cowboy" is the subject to insult. Gold's father mocks Kissinger's metaphorical verbiage when he says: "No, siree. He said he was a cowboy, didn't he? A lonesome cowboy riding into town to get the bad guys, didn't he? All by himself. Well, no cowboy was ever a Jew. (...) Show me one. Shepherds, maybe. No cowboys" (43–44). Later in the novel, the Governor makes the same point in an even funnier way: "Cowboys ain't short, ain't chubby, and don't talk with no Jewish accent" (448).

While Heller's focal point of the novel are Gold's efforts to outsmart Kissinger-the phrasemaker, the writer sporadically imitates linguistic mannerisms of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. Bruce Gold's harsh political review puts the three giants of the time; Kissinger, Nixon, and Agnew, on the same intellectual scale: "[Kissinger's] vaunted intelligence and brilliance remained as apocryphal and elusive as Nixon's grasp of fundamentals and Spiro Agnew's high IQ: no distinctive sign of any existed" (370). In the novel, out of the three men, Agnew earns the least acclaim. Yet, in Heller's subtle use of alliterations as incorporated in the book content, the reader is reminded of Agnew's obsessive fondness for alliterative performances. His somewhat baroque use of language demonstrates itself in such phrases as: "vicars of vacillation," "pampered prodigies," "pusillanimous pussyfooters"³⁹ – which, not accidentally, coincide with Heller's "contemporary constituency" (49), "emanate emanations" (206), etc. During a speech in San Diego on September 11, 1970 Agnew introduced one of his most farcical slogans when he said: "In the United States today, we have more than our share of *nattering nabobs of negativism*. They have formed their own 4-H Club – the 'hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs of history.'⁴⁰ Undoubtedly, the use of such phrases was indicative of a general tendency among "the bright young men" of the Nixon administration to reduce language to a meaningless content. Suitably, the 1970s invasion of Cambodia by U.S. troops was referred to as an "incursion," the White House previously made statements that were consequently denied became – in Ronald L. Ziegler's terms – "inoperative," a briefing for reporters was an "information opportunity," a plan that worked smoothly was claimed to be a "zero defect system."⁴¹ Nixon's Watergate scandal – and its subsequent enrichment of the language – brought, among others, such terms as "smoking gun" (indisputable proof of guilt) and a verb to "stonewall" (to impede an investigation by refusing to reveal information). During the Vietnam War American public was brainwashed to thinking that "peace was at hand" (Kissinger's ill timed slogan) and that Nixon's "peace with honor" was synonymous with a cessation of hostilities, not a defeat.

³⁸ Ibidem., pp. 608–609.

³⁹ *Penguin*, p. 370.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 371. Italics mine.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 31.

In *Good As Gold* Heller aims at revealing the linguistic entrapments of the Nixon–Kissinger propaganda. Bruce Gold's political ambitions to penetrate the world of Washington stand in the opposition to his family and friends's political judgements who collectively point out the self-deception in Gold's attempt to stifle his criticisms of Henry Kissinger. All throughout the novel, Heller's protagonist is exposed to Washington sloganeering being dragged into such 1970s scandals as Watergate, Cambodian invasion, wiretapping, and many others. An aspiring writer and a newcomer to the decision-making level, Gold quickly learns about the trickeries of the White House politics. In his article on Joseph Heller's fiction, Walter James Miller sums it up with excellent concision: "Gold's analysis of Kissinger's character helps Gold change his own. Heller develops a new form of satire: he criticizes a public figure by studying someone who imitates him. He concludes that such leaders are not worthy to serve as role models for anyone with a spark of conscience. Our leaders serve as models of what not to follow."⁴²

Good As Gold has never become the literary monument that *Catch-22* is nor has exerted a comparable influence on the life and literature of its times. Far overshadowed by *Catch-22* and thus an uncommon subject to critical analyses, Heller's less talked-about novel is introduced here as one of the most effective manifestations of the writer's social and political involvement. An inextricable factor of political issues, propaganda becomes a dominant form of communication in the novel and the novelist becomes a public spokesman exposing the hypocrisies and inefficiencies of American officialdom.

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⁴² W.J. Miller, "Joseph Heller's Fiction" [in:] *American Writing Today...*, p. 245.

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