

Trauma and Literature
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 33
Heller’s Catch–22 – Part 6

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'I'm not saying it because I hate you and want revenge. I'm not saying it because you rejected me and hurt my feelings terribly. No, I'm a man of medicine and I'm being coldly objective. I have very bad news for you. Are you man enough to take it?'

'God, no!' screamed Yossarian. 'I'll go right to pieces.'

Major Sanderson flew instantly into a rage. 'Can't you even do one thing right?' he pleaded, turning beet-red with vexation and crashing the sides of both fists down upon his desk together. 'The trouble with you is that you think you're too good for all the conventions of society. You probably think you're too good for me too, just because I arrived at puberty late. Well, do you know what you are? You're a frustrated, unhappy, disillusioned, undisciplined, maladjusted young man!'

Major Sanderson's disposition seemed to mellow as he reeled off the uncomplimentary adjectives.

'Yes, sir,' Yossarian agreed carefully. 'I guess you're right.'

'Of course I'm right. You're immature. You've been unable to adjust to the idea of war.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have a morbid aversion to dying. You probably resent the fact that you're at war and might get your head blown off any second.'

'I more than resent it, sir. I'm absolutely incensed.'

This NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Joseph Heller's novel “Catch-22”. This is the section where we were looking at a medical condition, described in very tragicomic terms through a lot of dark humor, through a very flippant mode of representation that makes the whole novel more cognitively complex.

The matter which is represented is very dark, is very serious, is very medical, is about people who are very ill, sick in the head, and they have different kinds of symptoms. But the manner of representing that matter is very different that seems to be incongruity between the matter and the manner. This novel is a lot about incongruity because this incongruity between matter and manner is being out of sync between what is represented, how it is represented.

It becomes the pointer to the larger spectacle of absurdity, which is novelist trying to capture the event of the Second World War. The absurdity of the war, the futility of the war, the purposelessness of the war, and the larger meaninglessness of the war; not just

a physical meaningless but also the metaphysical meaninglessness why is the war being fought in the first place.

Almost everything is trivialized in this novel. Almost everything is made in some kind of anticlimax in this novel, made in some kind of a parody in this novel. This constant production of parody and paradoxes makes this novel a very postmodernist one, but also a very flippant one something very deliberate, trying to be flippant in terms of representing a grand spectacle of violence.

Major Sanderson and Yossarian having a conversation and Sanderson is trying to diagnose Yossarian, is trying to give him the condition, describes his medical condition to him and we see how this entire episode is relying on paradoxes; entire communication is relying and built on paradoxes. The paradoxes produce humor, produce comicality in a certain sense.

It is a kind of humor that makes the condition even darker in quality because the fact that we are laughing about it means that it is so hollowed out, means it is not even tragic anymore and we had discussed this before. There seems to be some kind of a farcical quality about this and in his very famous statement of Marx first as tragedy, then as farce. This is so tragic that has been exhausted of its tragic quality; now it has just become a routine, slapstick ritual.

Major Sanderson is telling or talking to Yossarian in a very vindictive tone but trying to be objective and clinical about it. This is what he says. "I am not saying it because I hate you and want revenge. I am not saying it because you rejected me and hurt my feelings terribly. No, I am a man of medicine and I am being coldly objective. I have very bad news for you. Are you man enough to take it?"

The very first two sentences reveal the mind of Major Sanderson and like we discussed last time it is difficult to have the borders between the patient and the healer because the doctors appear to be needier psychologically than the patient so that even that borderline is disturbed, even that borderline is blurred. We do not quite know who is a doctor, who is the healer and who is getting healed.

The first two sentences where he is saying “I am not doing this because I hate you”. The obvious implication, the obvious reason that we can take from this so there is some personal hatred, some personal vendetta, some vindictive feeling. There is also the fact that Yossarian had rejected him and hurt his feelings terribly. “He sort of tries to undercut all that and say I am a man of medicine and I am being coldly objective.”

“I have very bad news for you. Are you man enough to take it. When you have a question like this, are you man enough to take, it almost is a rhetorical question. The expected answer is yes, just tell us what the condition is and I will do my best to praise it. Are you man enough to take it is a rhetorical question? But look at the way in which that common rhetorical question, that common rhetorical strategy is deconstructed in this novel to another production of paradox.”

“Where Yossarian says God, no screamed Yossarian. I will go right to pieces. So of course, I am not man enough to take it. I will just fry to pieces. I will just splinter into smithereens. I will breakdown, I will cry. I am not man enough. So that whole idea of this military masculinity is being parodied to a certain extent. Major Sanderson flew instantly into a rage. Cannot you even do one thing right?

“He pleaded, turning beet red with vexation and crashing the sides of both fists down upon his desk together. The trouble with you is you think you are too good for all the conventions of society. You probably think you are too good for me too just because I arrived at puberty late. Well, do you know what you are? You are frustrated, unhappy, disillusioned, undisciplined, maladjusted young man.”

We find that the rage of the doctor is more revealing a doctor psyche in terms of he seems to be needier, he seems to be more violent, he seems to be more in need for medicine, in need for treatment as he just loses his grip over everything. He just screams to Yossarian saying that you think you are too good for me; always snubbing me, you are undercutting me, you are deconstructing me.

“You are decimating my logic all the time just because I arrived at puberty late. And this whole idea of late puberty something we discussed last time as well, he seems to flag it up all the time and it is so strange because it is something that he thinks had made him

an anxious person; something that he thinks made him an incomplete person for a long time and just instead of not talking about this, he is always flagging it up which means that he is very fragile.”

There is a lot of fragility in his mind about his masculinity, about his puberty and then a series of adjectives. It is like a folio of adjectives directed to Yossarian when he says you are unhappy, you are frustrated, you are disillusioned, you are undisciplined, and you are maladjusted. All the things that he directs to Yossarian.

The general expectation is Yossarian be refuted, would defend himself, he will say no, I am not that but what does it say instead? Yes, sir, Yossarian agreed carefully. I guess you are right. Of course, I am right. You are immature, you have been unable to adjust the idea of war. Yes sir.”

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'Of course I'm right. You're immature.
You've been unable to adjust to the idea of war.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have a morbid aversion to dying. You probably resent the fact that you're at war and might get your head blown off any second.'

'I more than resent it, sir. I'm absolutely incensed.'

'You have deep-seated survival anxieties. And you don't like bigots, bullies, snobs or hypocrites. Subconsciously there are many people you hate.'

'Consciously, sir, consciously,' Yossarian corrected in an effort to help.
'I hate them consciously.'

'You're antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived. Misery depresses you. Ignorance depresses you. Persecution depresses you. Violence depresses you. Slums depress you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you. You know, it wouldn't surprise me if you're a manic-depressive!'

'Yes, sir. Perhaps I am.'

'Don't try to deny it.'

“You have a morbid aversion to dying. You probably resent the fact that you are at war and might get your head blown off any second. I more than resent it sir. I am absolutely incensed.” There seems to be almost some kind of an Oscar Wilde quality about this. There is a lot of humor, a lot of paradox, a lot of epigrammatic wit; epigrammatic means something which is supposed to shock you, reversal of logical, and a logic reversal.

“The doctor is saying you resent the idea of dying. And Yossarian is saying I am incensed by it, I am infuriated by it, and I am more than resented. You have deep-seated survival anxieties. And you do not like bigots, bullies, snobs or hypocrites.

Subconsciously there are many people you hate. He is trying to appropriate the Freudian vocabulary.

“He says that you do not like bigots, you do not like bullies, you do not like snobs, and you do not like hypocrites. And you hide them subconsciously. And again, Yossarian’s response is very paradoxical. He says consciously sir, consciously, Yossarian corrected in an effort to help. I hate them consciously. There is nothing subconscious about my hatred of bullies and bigots. I hate them very consciously.”

This is sort of parodying, the Freudian vocabulary that the doctor is trying to procure over here. “You are antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived. Misery depresses you. Ignorance depresses you. Prosecution depresses you. Violence depresses you. Slums depress you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you. It would not surprise me if you are a manic-depressive.”

It is a very serious session almost like a therapy session, but look at the adjectives, look at the nouns over here associated with depress. This is about depression ostensibly on the surface but the things that depressed was very odd things which despicable in the first place poverty is something that depress people.

This seems to be some kind of medical analysis but what ends up being is a commonplace of the cliches, of platitude. The production of paradox is also production of platitude, commonplace, something which is very common, and something which is a cliché, something which is just there like platitude. Ignorance, persecution, slums, greed, crime; all these things depress you; so you are manic depressive.

This combination of manic-depression is the medical terminology, a medical classification with resentment against things which are despicable in the first place that combination is created somewhat of a comic effect over here. But at a larger level, it also shows the innate incongruity of medical treatment, the innate incompleteness and inadequacy of the medical treatment over here.

This is supposed to be a therapist, this is supposed to be a doctor and the voice of the doctor is full of incompleteness and not just incompleteness but also there is an inbuilt paradox in his medical voice. There is an inbuilt fault line in his medical voice. He talks about manic depression and then he plots depression with things which are automatically, even normally despicable. “You are manic depressive. Yes sir. Perhaps I am. Yossarian’s response is very good. Do not try to deny it.”

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‘I’m not denying it, sir,’ said Yossarian, pleased with the miraculous rapport that finally existed between them. ‘I agree with all you’ve said.’

‘Then you admit you’re crazy, do you?’

‘Crazy?’ Yossarian was shocked. ‘What are you talking about? Why am I crazy? You’re the one who’s crazy!’

Major Sanderson turned red with indignation again and crashed both fists down upon his thighs. ‘Calling me crazy,’ he shouted in a sputtering rage, ‘is a typically sadistic and vindictive paranoiac reaction! You really are crazy!’

‘Then why don’t you send me home?’

‘And I’m going to send you home!’

‘They’re going to send me home!’ Yossarian announced jubilantly, as he hobbled back into the ward.

‘Me too!’ A. Fortiori rejoiced. ‘They just came to my ward and told me.’

‘What about me?’ Dunbar demanded petulantly of the doctors.

‘You?’ they replied with asperity. ‘You’re going with Yossarian. Right back into combat!’

“I am not denying it sir said Yossarian, pleased with the miraculous rapport that finally existed between them. I agree with you, with all that you said. Then you admit that you are crazy, do you? Crazy. Yossarian was shocked. What are you talking about? Why am I crazy? You are the one who is crazy. Major Sanderson turned red with indignation again and crashed both fists down upon his thighs.”

“Calling me crazy, he shouted in a sputtering rage, is a typically sadistic and vindictive paranoiac reaction. You really are crazy. Look at the way instead of hold on to some loose terms, some very shallow signifiers and as you are vindictive, you are paranoid, you are sadistic, etc. You know these terms which are medically used in a very loose way, but then it is quite clear.”

Major Sanderson over here seems to be more fragile and a more infuriated more easily, more pushed and are more anxious over here much more than Yossarian is. The moment he is called crazy, the moment he is called insane, his anger, his resentment, his response

is more violent which is reflecting the fact that maybe he is quite fragile and insane; maybe he needs help, maybe his mental health is not good.

It is worse than Yossarian at many levels. “Then why do not you send me home? And I am going to send you home because again remember, the idea of going home is something of a liberation for Yossarian as well. Yossarian probably wants to stay during the war in this hospital because he has been waited upon, he has been taking very well care of.”

The very opening of the sentence of the novel where there is a dilemma about Yossarian’s liver whether it is jaundiced or not; if it is jaundice he will be treated, but there is jaundice, but at the same time, the doctors do not even know if he does not have jaundice. They cannot send him home or go back to the war either. They are going to send me home Yossarian announced jubilantly as hobbled back into the world.

“This becomes almost liberation, he wants to go home, and he does not want to go back to the war front. Me too. A. Fortiori rejoiced. They just came to my ward and told me. What about me? Dunbar demanded petulantly of the doctors. You they replied with asperity. You are going with Yossarian. Right back into combat. You are going to receive rain right back into combat.”

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'Me too!' A. Fortiori rejoiced. 'They just came to my ward and told me.'

'What about me?' Dunbar demanded petulantly of the doctors.

'You?' they replied with asperity. 'You're going with Yossarian. Right back into combat!'

And back into combat they both went. Yossarian was enraged when the ambulance returned him to the squadron, and he went limping for justice to Doc Daneeka, who glared at him glumly with misery and disdain.

'You!' Doc Daneeka exclaimed mournfully with accusing disgust, the egg-shaped pouches under both eyes firm and censorious. 'All you ever think of is yourself. Go take a look at the bomb line if you want to see what's been happening since you went to the hospital.'

Yossarian was startled. 'Are we losing?'

'Losing?' Doc Daneeka cried. 'The whole military situation has been going to hell ever since we captured Paris. I knew it would happen.' He paused, his sulking ire turning to melancholy, and frowned irritably as though it were all Yossarian's fault. 'American troops are pushing into German soil. The Russians have captured back all of Romania. Only yesterday the Greeks in the Eighth Army captured Rimini.'

“And back into combat they both went. Yossarian was enraged when the ambulance returned him to the squadron and he went limping for justice to Doc Daneeka, who

glared at him glumly with misery and disdain. Instead of sending him home, they send him back to the combat and resents them for it and Dunbar goes along with Yossarian.”

“Doc Daneeka exclaimed mournfully with accusing disgust, the egg-shaped pouches under both eyes firm and censorious. All you ever think about is yourself. Go take a look at the bomb line if you want to see what has been happening since you went to the hospital.” Now at this point in this novel, the idea of war comes up, again to lot of black humor, a lot of dark humor.

The way war is represented over here the differences between winning or losing blurs away and winning is not necessarily a good thing, losing is not necessarily a bad thing. And then we find that the whole spectacle of war has been parodied through different paradoxes. This is one of the scenes in the novel where the real war is brought before us, it is not just people talking about the war in hospital, but people the battleground talking about it from a very close perspective.

Doc Daneeka over here is trying to give an overview to Yossarian in turns what had happened ever since he went away. “Yossarian was startled. Are we losing? Losing? Doc Daneeka cried. The whole military situation has been going to hell ever since we captured Paris. And this is again funny because Yossarian is anxious if they are losing or not, but Daneeka would tell him is that we are winning and that is a problem because Germans are retreating. “

The war is going to be over very soon and something worse might be followed, so we will continue the war to carry on. We would like the war to continue, to carry on for a while because as long the Germans are fighting, we have something to do. Since the war is over, they will send us somewhere worse. The whole reality of war over here is very different, is much deglamorized.

There is no heroism over here at all. There is a lot of cynicism, very cynical view of the war. And also, the whole idea of war is some kind of a futile enterprise, one war will end, some other war will begin at some of the front. You may as well continue this war and that seems to be the sentiment over here. But the major, the fundamental thing over here that we would like to do.

We should be paying attention to as our winning or losing are not notionally or conventionally consumed. They have very different connotations, very different implications in the situation. He says, Daneeka says the whole military situation has been going to hell ever since we captured Paris. You expect that they are losing that is probably what is being said. But then you get something else different, entirely different.

“I knew it would happen. He paused, his sulking ire turning into melancholy and frowned irritably as though it were all Yossarian’s fault. American troops are pushing into German soil. The Russians have captured back all of Romania. Only yesterday the Greeks in the Eighth Army captured Rimini. Allies are winning.” This seems to be the condition and yet we have a sense of consternation and resentment and despise and loathing about this.

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The Germans are on the defensive everywhere! Doc Daneeka paused again and fortified himself with a huge breath for a piercing ejaculation of grief. 'There's no more Luftwaffe left!' he wailed. He seemed ready to burst into tears. 'The whole Gothic line is in danger of collapsing!'

'So?' asked Yossarian. 'What's wrong?'

'What's wrong?' Doc Daneeka cried. 'If something doesn't happen soon, Germany may surrender. And then we'll all be sent to the Pacific!'

Yossarian gawked at Doc Daneeka in grotesque dismay. 'Are you crazy? Do you know what you're saying?'

'Yeah, it's easy for you to laugh,' Doc Daneeka sneered.

'Who the hell is laughing?'

'At least you've got a chance. You're in combat and might get killed. But what about me? I've got nothing to hope for.'

'You're out of your goddam head!' Yossarian shouted at him emphatically, seizing him by the shirt front. 'Do you know that? Now keep your stupid mouth shut and listen to me.'

Doc Daneeka wrenched himself away. 'Don't you dare talk to me like that. I'm a licensed physician.'

“The Germans are on the defensive everywhere. Doc Daneeka paused again and fortified himself with a huge breath for a piercing ejaculation of grief. There is no more Luftwaffe left. Luftwaffe is a German aircraft, the German air fight, there is no more Luftwaffe left. The Germans retreating everywhere. He wailed. He seemed ready to burst into tears. The whole Gothic line is in danger of collapsing.”

The Gothic line is a joke line and that is a very strange description, but Gothic is supposed to be some kind of implication of vampire and that seems to be the sort of German condition the German face and that is retrieving the collapsing and that is a bad

thing when Yossarian says. “What is wrong? And what seems to be the problem when this is what the condition is?”

It means we are winning the battle, we are winning the war, the allies are winning, Germans retreated, the Russians are pushing them back, and the Americans are pushing them back. “What is wrong? Doc Daneeka cried. If something does not happen soon, Germany may surrender. And then we will all be sent to the Pacific. Germany will surrender very soon.” As soon as it happens that is going to be a disaster for us.

This is a point where we realize that the real war has very different kind of dynamic for people as you fight the battle. For an outsider, winning and losing are very fundamentally black and white things. There is a very clear difference from the winner and a loser. But for someone who fights a war, for someone who is a professional soldier, it has very different kind of implications.

When the Germans lose very soon, the German surrender very soon, he says we will be sent to the Pacific where a worse fate might await us. Yossarian gawked at Doc Daneeka in grotesque dismay. The word grotesque is important over here because the word grotesque is connected to carnivalesque. Grotesque is a kind of humour as well, so it is a misshaped humour. It is a humour which is not innocent at all.

It is a very politically incorrect humour; it sometimes is a violent humor, sometimes it comes to the cost of something else. But the fundamental characteristic of grotesque humour is misshaped quality; something which has a very poor shape and that shapelessness of the humour often has very close proximity to death, to loss due to pain, suffering, etc. It is the grotesque quality of the humour, something is always very close to loss and suffering and pain and sometimes death as well.

“So grotesque dismay. Are you crazy? Do you know what you are saying? Yeah, it is easy for you to laugh. Doc Daneeka sneered. Who the hell is laughing? At least you have got a chance you are in combat and might get killed. But what about me? I have got nothing to hope for.” The paradox over here and this is a point in the story where we know that the comedy which comes out of this is a very deep-seated tragedy.

It is so tragic that it does not have a tragic voice anymore. People who die in the war being envied. This is what Daneeka is saying, “Yossarian at least you have a chance of getting killed and that would be like liberation for you. I mean you are in combat, you can just go in the air and someone can shoot you down and in the process you get killed that is the end of it. What about me? I have done nothing to hope for.”

In a certain sense, this comicality also has a Sisyphean quality. “The Myth of Sisyphus” is an archetypal story about futility. Someone is doomed Sisyphus in this case, someone is doomed to push a stone on top of a hill and the moment the hill reaches the top the stone rolls down and again the person has to push it all over again and this just continues at infinitum.

There is no liberation, there is no end to it. This Sisyphean quality is something which is highlighted over here. This war is going to be continued forever. This endlessness of war, the honorary of war, the burden of war.

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'Who the hell is laughing?'

'At least you've got a chance. You're in combat and might get killed. But what about me? I've got nothing to hope for.'

'You're out of your goddam head!' Yossarian shouted at him emphatically, seizing him by the shirt front. 'Do you know that? Now keep your stupid mouth shut and listen to me.'

Doc Daneeka wrenched himself away. 'Don't you dare talk to me like that. I'm a licensed physician.'

'Then keep your stupid licensed physician's mouth shut and listen to what they told me up at the hospital. I'm crazy. Did you know that?'

'So?'

'Really crazy.'

'So?'

'I'm nuts. Cuckoo. Don't you understand? I'm off my rocker. They sent someone else home in my place by mistake. They've got a licensed psychiatrist up at the hospital who examined me, and that was his verdict. I'm really insane.'

'So?'

“You are out of your goddam head. Yossarian shouted at him emphatically, seizing him by the shirt front. Do you know what? Now keep your stupid mouth shut and listen to me. Doc Daneeka wrenched himself away. Do not you dare talk to me about that? I am a licensed physician.” The fact that he is a licensed physician is brought to the forefront and again like Major Sanderson, we see here this person Daneeka who is some type of a doctor in the camp, he is in more in need of treatment.

He is in need of therapy. “He says I am just a doctor. I will stay here forever. I will go on curing mad people, mad soldiers and in the process my mental health will just go to pieces, fall to pieces, but these were soldiers who can get killed and there would be an end, there would be a closure to that, but I have no closure. I mean I am just going to go on forever.”

“This war ends, so somewhere in the Pacific where the conditions of the soldiers are worse and I may have to treat them. We see how these licensed physicians, they sort of end up becoming more mentally unstable, they end up becoming the people who need more help, more therapy. I am a licensed physician. Then keep your stupid licensed physician’s mouth shut and listen to what they told me at the hospital. I am crazy.

Did you know that? I am being classified as a mad person. So? Really crazy. So? I am nuts. Cuckoo. Do not you understand? I am off my rocker. They sent someone else home in my place by mistake. They have got licensed psychiatrist up at the hospital who examined me and that was his verdict. I am really insane. So?”

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'So?' Yossarian was puzzled by Doc Daneeka's inability to comprehend. 'Don't you see what that means? Now you can take me off combat duty and send me home. They're not going to send a crazy man out to be killed, are they?'

'Who else will go?'

“So? Yossarian was puzzled by Doc Daneeka’s inability to comprehend. Do not you see what that means? Now you can take me off combat duty and send me home. They are not going to send a crazy man out there to be killed, are they? Who else would go?” This is the ending of this chapter, chapter 27 and it is very telling kind of an ending. First of all, Yossarian says that someone told me; a licensed physician in the earlier camp told me I am crazy, so you just have to corroborate it.

He resents to his doctor Doc Daneeka. He says just write me a letter to classify me as mad person so that they can send me home because they would not send a mad person to fight in a combat. It is technically is not possible, and not permissible medically. But the doctor's response is very telling and very dark. He says who else will go but for a mad person will go and fight the combat and be in the battlefield.

It shows that the whole spectacle of war, the whole event of war, the whole process of war as a mad process, is an insane irrational process. So, you have to be the very fact that you are here in the first place, means irrational by default. The whole process is crazy. The adjectives Yossarian had used before; "I am Cuckoo. So, I am nuts, I am Cuckoo. I have just been losing my grip over things, etc."

It seems to be the problem, so send me home because I cannot fight a war. The doctor's response is because you all that you are here in the first place. Because whole war is fought on that irrational impulse, is not a rational one; no war is rational and the fact that we fight this war, spending millions and millions of money on this, spending lives, slaughtering people, slaughtering property, it all for what?

The purposelessness of it has been pointed out by a doctor. Now, this novel about the military medicine because a lot of figures as you can see who embody the military medical figures, these are embodied as the figure of authority, but unlike "Mrs. Dalloway" where they retain authority, their civilian doctors; they profess things, they dictate things, they give orders, etc. The military doctors they are in need of help.

They seemed to be completely cracked up. They seemed to be completely deconstructed. They seemed to be completely unsettled by the trauma that they consume every single day. There is a very logical reversal of the therapist and a person who is undergoing therapy. The doctor over here says that the only crazy person will go, only a cuckoo will go, only a mad person will go to the line of combat.

We cannot send you home because the fact that we here and you are still alive and you are mad, makes you all the more eligible to go. Madness, sanity, insanity they become very different categories in this novel; they almost consume each other to the point

comes and no one is sane, everyone is insane in different degrees. Insanity cannot be liberation anymore. Insanity will actually push someone.

Insanity will still qualify someone to fight this combat because entire combat, the entire battle, entire war is a spectacle of insanity, spectacle of irrationality. That has been constantly commented on in this novel at different kinds of ways; this mock serious ways, tragicomic ways, dark comic ways. But at the end of it, all the bottom of it all, it is final endless human suffering to such an extent that it cannot have a tragic voice anymore. It must just produce some form of pseudo comicality to convey itself.

To communicate so because even the luxury of tragedy is denied to them, even the right to be tragic is denied to them, even the grandeur tragedy is denied to them; as such is the exhaustion, such is the hollowness of these people.