



Heart shaped prose : Romanticism in J.D. Salinger's glass novellas
by Natalie Michelle Brown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
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Abstract:

The novel, novellas and short stories of J.D. Salinger have long been the topic of literary criticism; very little of that existing criticism (only two brief, decades-old articles), however, explicitly acknowledges Salinger's Romanticism. This thesis seeks to illuminate and discuss elements of Romanticism within Salinger's work, engaging traditional understandings and tenets of Romanticism as an 18th-19th century literary movement, and with especial attention paid to Salinger's series of novellas about the Glass family, which comprise the bulk of his output. While Salinger has been given innumerable labels, many, if not all, of them valid, 'Romantic', it turns out, is yet another that can be applied to him, when a reader considers, as this thesis does, his roots in, clever allusions to, and persistent echoing of that movement and its characteristics in his own texts. To acknowledge the Romanticism of Salinger's most important, and, for him, consuming, works is to contribute an idea—hitherto only touched upon—to the scholarship about him, and to offer a fresh context in which readers both familiar with and new to his writing might read it.

"HEART SHAPED PROSE":
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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

The novel, novellas and short stories of J.D. Salinger have long been the topic of literary criticism; very little of that existing criticism (only two brief, decades-old articles), however, explicitly acknowledges Salinger's Romanticism. This thesis seeks to illuminate and discuss elements of Romanticism within Salinger's work, engaging traditional understandings and tenets of Romanticism as an 18th-19th century literary movement, and with especial attention paid to Salinger's series of novellas about the Glass family, which comprise the bulk of his output. While Salinger has been given innumerable labels, many, if not all, of them valid, 'Romantic', it turns out, is yet another that can be applied to him, when a reader considers, as this thesis does, his roots in, clever allusions to, and persistent echoing of that movement and its characteristics in his own texts. To acknowledge the Romanticism of Salinger's most important, and, for him, consuming, works is to contribute an idea--hitherto only touched upon--to the scholarship about him, and to offer a fresh context in which readers both familiar with and new to his writing might read it.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the university library, I deposited my desired books upon the checkout counter. The librarian, whom, it is safe to presume, took pleasure in the variety of texts that passed through her hands each day, recited their titles aloud as she scanned them. "*Romantic Poetry and Prose...Romanticism and Consciousness...The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romantic Tradition...*" The litany continued, only to be interrupted by an abrupt pause, and then, "...and a book by J.D. Salinger?" She looked up at me, one eyebrow raised quizzically. "Salinger? A Romantic?" she said, guessing at my notion. I, affecting the smug, close-lipped mysteriousness of a mad scientist who has some universe-altering potion in the works, or a tough bookie who knows which horse is going to win, or a tried-and-true academic of the first order, said nothing, just vaguely grinned and walked away, my baffling bevy of books in arms.

In truth, while buoyed by academic research, my notion of Salinger-the-Romantic has sprung from decidedly non-academic grounds. Like many examples of literary scholarship, this endeavor represents no attempt to solve a 'problem' within, or even to 'problematize' some chunk of the massive edifice that is Literature. Rather, it represents an attempt, unashamedly selfish and subjective, to find out why a certain chunk of literature, which does influence and change lives, changed my own; why, in even more simplistic terms, I like it.

My interest in literature began in early adolescence when I encountered, and promptly devoured, the novellas of Salinger: *Franny*; *Zooey*; *Raise High the Roof Beam,*

Carpenters and Seymour: an Introduction. These novellas about the Glass family, a tribe of seven siblings inclined to childhood genius, pantheistic mysticism, poetry, searching, and seeing, left a markedly more indelible impression on me than did Salinger's better-known novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

More About the Glass Novellas

The Glass family is headed by Les and Bessie, the father and mother, two retired vaudevillians whose press clippings and old photographs, along with the scrapbooks detailing their genius Jewish-Irish offspring's days on the radio show, "It's a Wise Child," are plastered, with characteristically Glass-like sentimentality--directly into the walls of their kaleidoscopically cluttered New York City apartment. The eldest Glass sibling, Seymour, is the most brilliant of all, the family's resident seer and poet, sees "the current of poetry that runs through things, all things" (and it is that very same current which Salinger himself seeks to illuminate in the novellas). Buddy, the second eldest, the family writer, 'writes' and narrates each of the Glass stories. Boo-Boo, Wake and Walt Glass—the middle siblings—are somewhat peripheral.¹ But the two youngest, Franny and Zooey, beautiful black-haired, blue-eyed actors, are as brilliant as Seymour—their primary teacher—could have made them, steeped in various spiritual and mystical traditions, and struggling to exist as the "freaks" they are (thanks to Seymour's guru-like influence) in a world they view as plagued by artificiality and phoniness. The Glass stories are New York stories, set in the 1940's and 50's. They are indisputably American (just as Franny's figure is said to be "irreproachably Americanese"), conversational, mid-

century. Everyone smokes, and Zooey swears incessantly. But, at their heart, is the same “current of poetry” of which Seymour speaks. Eudora Welty, in reviewing the Glass novellas, wrote, “These stories concern children a good deal of the time [the siblings are represented in both childhood and adulthood], but they are God’s children. Mr. Salinger’s work deals with innocence, and starts with innocents...[These stories] all pertain to the lack of something in the world, and it might be said that what Mr. Salinger has written about so far is the absence of love.” What Seymour and the other Glasses achieve, or seek to achieve, is a perception and realization of the omnipresence of love in an at times ugly world. Theirs is a story steeped in mysticism, in poetry and in Romanticism.

As I grew older, and meandered through the world of literature, as both a leisurely reader and a student, the qualities of the Glass stories—their style, content, form (or lack thereof) and characters—continued to simmer in my mind. Like every nerdy bookish introvert, I read a reasonable amount. But my own personal tastes, as both a reader and a creative writer, were strongly informed by these stories that so impressed themselves upon me as a young adolescent.

Those aforementioned personal tastes, in the years since, have run toward a decidedly Romantic or neo-Romantic style of writing, with especial attention paid toward Kerouac and Lawrence. Many of my own attempts at creative prose have a decidedly Romantic tint. Because I favored these authors and composed these creative writings before learning about Romanticism as an historical movement in literature or reading any of its traditionally-recognized ‘originators’ and purveyors (Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, et al.), I have wondered just how the characteristics of Romanticism have so

wholly managed to seep into my aesthetic as both a reader and a writer. Was I a 19th century Romantic in a former life? Did I, “in one damn incarnation or another”—to use Zoë Glass’ distinctly eloquent phrasing—have a “hankering” to write and think like a Romantic, finally realized in this lifetime? While charming, such explanations are dubious.

I enacted a sort of ‘source study’ upon myself. I considered my first influence, the one who sparked all interest in reading and in creating new literature in the first place: Salinger. Could it be that *Salinger*, that mid-century American author specializing in New York-accented, blasphemy-tinged prose, actually conceived and created something Romantic in those Glass stories? Are the Glass novellas, though decidedly postmodern and redolent of 1950’s urbanity (not 19th century flora-and-fauna fecundity), be an offshoot of the figurative vine of Romanticism that has wound itself, though alternately privileged and avoided, through the past two-hundred-plus years of literature?

After posing this question, I researched the history, hallmarks and perpetuators of traditional Romantic literature. Upon critical re-examination of the Glass novellas in that context, I have concluded that, indeed, Salinger’s novellas are Romantic in style, content and form.

Labeling Salinger

As easily as I can call him Romantic, so can (and have) others tagged Salinger with a multitude of labels. There Salinger the Realist (a result of his conversational narrative style, exquisitely true-ringing dialogue, and attention to the seemingly insignificant miscellany that infuse everyday life, such as the painstakingly catalogued

contents of the Glasses' medicine cabinet). There is Salinger the Surrealist (because of his disregard for conventional narrative form). We have Salinger the Stylist (a jab, implying that he is more style than substance). And how about Salinger the Buddhist, Salinger the Eastern Mystic, or Zen Salinger (all of which are resultant of Seymour and the gang's study of Eastern religions, and Seymour's penchant for writing haikus and other East Asian-influenced poetry)? Most recently, we've had Salinger the Pedophile (thanks to a tell-all by a minor American female writer, in which she recounts her love affair, at an alarmingly young age, with Salinger—thereby casting his literary preoccupation with children and childhood in a new light).

Indeed, there has been no shortage of scholarly and non-scholarly conversation about Salinger. All the endless tongue-wagging—among both workaday fans and certifiable critics—that goes on about Salinger may very well be encouraged by his intrigue-enhancing choice to become a hermit shortly after achieving his literary fame. In Cornish, New Hampshire, the elderly author hides out in his farmhouse, refusing, just as he has for the past four decades, to say anything at all about his life or work. This reclusiveness has given readers and critics ample room to use their imaginations when it comes to filling in the blanks that Salinger's silence leaves. New, Salinger-themed websites crop up with impressive frequency as he is perpetually 'discovered' by young readers. Recent Hollywood films such as "The Royal Tenenbaums," (which could be called "The Glasses") and "Igby Goes Down" blatantly demonstrate his influence and evoke the spirit of his work. And contemporary, non-scholarly books about his work's

potent effect are added to the plethora of published critical, academic scholarship which dates back to the late fifties.²

“Salinger the Romantic,” however, is a claim one must make something of an argument for. Among the overwhelming abundance of literary criticism that has been penned about Salinger, only two short articles explicitly refer to his Romanticism.³ The essays that comprise this book may be seen as contributions to *that* conversation, a fleshing out of each of Salinger’s Romantic characteristics, an attempt to furnish another genre in which we might contextualize him.⁴ But before progressing any further, it is imperative to clarify just what is meant by ‘Romanticism.’

What is Romanticism?

“Romanticism,” write Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling in their introduction to the Oxford anthology, *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, “resists its definers, who can fix neither its characteristics or its dates” (Bloom 1). Nevertheless, just as Salinger has been relentlessly defined despite his own reluctance, it has happened that Romanticism has been defined as well, though how successful those attempts at definition have been is debatable. After all, one marked characteristic of Romanticism is that it privileges subjectivity; so what Romanticism itself *is* has, in part, always been influenced by the subjectivity of its definer. And, nearly everyone who was, or is, Romantic, is Romantic in his or her own way. Still, there has been some overlap in the qualities that mark the definitions, ‘originators,’ perpetrators and literary expressions of Romanticism; otherwise, anthologies like Bloom and Trilling’s—which gathers together examples of it—would not be possible.

Webster's Dictionary tries commendably to be comprehensive in its definition:

A literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions, and marked esp. in English literature by sensibility and the use of autobiographical material, an exaltation of the primitive and the common man, and appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy...

To place the period of genesis for Romanticism in the 18th century is probably a safe bet on the dictionary's part, though other sources assert that it truly bloomed in the early 19th century. The Oxford anthology of *Romantic Poetry and Prose* posits that "...Romanticism, as a historical phase of literature, is taken as extending from [William] Blake's earliest poems (printed in 1783..." but later concedes that Romanticism existed "...long before Blake's *Poetical Sketches* of 1783" (Bloom 3). Surely, in the history of humanity, there have always been modes of perception and expression that would now qualify as Romantic. And, early, primitive peoples themselves are *Romanticized* for their closeness to the earth, freedom from the ills of civilization, deification of nature, etc.⁵ But, as strictly a literary trend, Romanticism began to flourish in such a manner that it was *noticeable* and *noted* in the late 18th/early 19th centuries.

While Blake is considered to have 'fathered' the movement in England, Jean Jacques Rousseau did as much over in France, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is credited with sparking it in Germany. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and, later, Walt Whitman are said to have picked up the trend in America. But what was it, besides their being loosely contemporaneous with one another, that unified all these men?

The hallmarks of Romanticism in literature (characteristics shared by the works of the aforementioned authors, as well as their literary heirs) might be cataloged as follows:

a reverence for childhood/adolescence; a pantheistic, mystical notion that all things are holy or have divine attributes, especially nature; a belief in the possibility or frequency of direct communion with God; an interest in autobiography or true-life stories, and in chronicling (or pretending to be chronicling) 'real' events and the stories of 'real' people; an emphasis on subjectivity, spontaneity and freedom of form in writing (an "organic model" of artistic creation, wherein art passes *through* the artist, who is an *agent* of its expression, rather than its *maker*); a concern with the Individual's struggle for authenticity and freedom in an artificial, mechanized society; a glorification of the seer- or genius-figure; the inclusion of letters and/or journal entries in works, or works comprised entirely of them to enhance the sense of 'real life'; the presence, in man, of inner light/wisdom/God-given gifts/a core self/soul; a preference of imagination over logic and rationality; and, the adoption of the novella (short novel) form (which first originated in 16th century Italy and Spain).

For evidence of child- and childhood-worship, we can look to Coleridge, with his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," which celebrates the inherent wisdom and ability to 'see' that is present in childhood, and laments the loss of that divinely childlike perception.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Appareled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream,
It is not now as it hath been of yore; --
Turn whereso'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more (Bloom 176).

Rousseau, meanwhile, is credited with “inventing” adolescence—that curious, previously undefined stage between child- and adulthood—via his writings (Bloom 5). A pantheistic perception that all things are connected by some divine, overarching essence is articulated in Emerson’s transcendentalist concept of “the Oversoul,” and for the mystical omnipresence of God or the divine, one can look to Blake’s “Tyger” and his “Lamb,” both of which were fashioned by the same hand. Autobiography and biography figure in the works of Rousseau (in *The Confessions*) and Wordsworth (in *Biographia Literaria*), while the affected posture taken by the author that he is chronicling real-life, actual events, or that he and the story’s narrator are one and the same person (who actually witnessed said events) was adopted by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Spontaneity and freedom of expression and form are embodied in the poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley, which lack “universal appeal” precisely because they are “idiosyncratic enough to be menacing” (Bloom 399). Thoreau’s *Walden* expresses the individual’s struggle for authenticity in an artificial, oppressive society. The plight of the sage, the seer, the genius is explicated in Charles Lamb’s *Sanity of True Genius*. Goethe composed epistolary literature in his aforementioned novella, while Dorothy Wordsworth (William’s sister) made literary use of diary entries in *The Grasmere Journals*. Blake imagined the ever-present ‘soul’ or ‘daemon’ with his poem “The Spectre Around Me Night And Day.” John Keats’ poetry places the imagination over the physical and literal, conveys “that we are compelled to imagine more than we can understand” of the physical world in which we are trapped (Bloom 495). Finally, the novella—traditionally used to chronicle a ‘family romance’—is a form associated with several of the above facets of

Romanticism: it purports to be a depiction of ‘real’ people and ‘true’ events narrated by someone who is close to said people or events; it often relies upon letters and/or journal entries; and it imaginatively defies conventional notions of form and style.

Enter Salinger

Salinger’s novellas are Romantic because they synthesize all of the above-cataloged characteristics. A collection of threads can be imagined to extend out of the Glass novellas and connect to the works of Salinger’s Romantic literary ancestors.

In his blurring of the line between himself and Buddy Glass—who tells readers it is *he* who writes all of the Glass novellas—Salinger creates what I term a Narrator/Author ambiguity that threads back to Goethe (among others). In his own novella, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe effaces his own self, his own persona, entirely and merges with the persona of the narrator, something not commonly done pre-Romanticism. Salinger, writing a century-and-a-half after Goethe, takes this Romantic technique to a whole new level. As the Glass novellas progress, so does his own self-effacement. So steeped does he become in his family romance (he eventually ceased to publish anything *other* than Glass stories) that Salinger-the-Author virtually disappears; readers are left with Buddy Glass. Interestingly, Buddy bears many characteristics similar to those which are known about Salinger, and his characteristically self-conscious confessions often seem to be Salinger talking; he serves, ultimately, as a kind of fictional stand-in/mouthpiece for Salinger. John Updike put it succinctly when he said of Salinger, “Their [the Glasses] invention has become a hermitage for him.”

Other figurative threads—those related to the Glass Novella’s unapologetic “childism”, reach back to both Blake and Coleridge.⁶ One thread reaches back to Blake, whose *Songs of Innocence*, a collection of poems—while not explicitly meant to merely signify ‘childhood’—do illustrate a “state of the soul through which we pass” (Bloom 18). Nearly all of Salinger’s Glass siblings, but especially Franny, are engaged in the struggle to reconcile a state of the soul that is Blake’s “innocence” with the inevitable state of the soul that is Blake’s “experience” (which state he explores in his *Songs of Experience*). Another thread extends from the novellas back to Coleridge, whose “Intimations Ode” embodies the distinctly Romantic regard for childhood, and lays the foundation for a pseudo-worship of childhood and of the child, without which it is hard to imagine Salinger composing any of his stories at all; every one of them concerns (and nearly deifies) children and childhood, or narratizes the lamentable loss thereof.

One can follow a thread extending from Salinger’s distinct and ever-present mysticism back to Whitman, to whom he has been likened by more critics than were willing to call him a Romantic outright, though Whitman himself has been aligned with the Romantics. “Salinger is allied, in a basic way, to the joyful mysticism of Whitman...it is clear that his tastes (and his themes) are more closely akin to the affirmative poetry of the mystical tradition.”⁷ Substitute “mystical tradition” with “Romantic tradition” and the assessment is even more accurate, for more Romantic poets than Whitman (Blake, notably) wrote in the spiritual, mystical vein that Salinger later appropriated for his novellas, much to some critics annoyance. He irreverently responds to such critics through the guise of Buddy in *Seymour: an Introduction*: “People are already shaking

their heads over me, and any immediate professional use on my part of the word 'God,' except as a familiar, healthy American expletive, will be taken—or rather confirmed—as the very worst kind of name-dropping and a sure sign that I am going to the dogs.”

Whether Salinger's irreverent, Buddy-cloaked response to his critics can be taken as a sign he thinks he is, in fact, a genius writer is unclear. What *is* clear is that he relies heavily on the idea of genius, of inherently, preternaturally wise characters, of seers, in composing the Glass novellas. Salinger's was a preoccupation with genius—divine, God-given genius—not seen in literature *since* the Romantic period of the 18th/19th centuries. As children, each of the Glass siblings is a celebrity fixture on the radio show, “It's a Wise Child.” The very term and concept of a “wise child” harkens back to innumerable Romantics. The young Glasses are Seymour Glass, we are made to understand, however, is the *most* genius of all the Glasses, the family's sage and seer. He is the tortured poet, “dazzled to death” (literally, as the novellas take place after his suicide, in the shadow of his ghost, and he appears via the memories of his siblings) by all that he sees, all that he cannot help but see. He is the awakened one, the enlightened one, and the most eccentric. Outsiders (non-Glasses, such as his wife's family) deem him in need of psychoanalysis, question his sanity.⁸ But, in Buddy's/Salinger's hands, Seymour is clearly meant to be the *most* sane, the *most* beautiful. Those who question him are always represented as gross, foolish, or—the worst thing one can be in a Salinger text—phony. Even his suicide is rendered as a sort of self-immolation, a reaction being so awakened that he is overwhelmed by all that he perceives, not a result of madness. Seymour is the hero of the Glass novellas; he is representative Lamb's “The Sanity of Genius.”

Most of Seymour's poetic genius is conveyed through his journal entries, which figure in two of the novellas, and one epistle, directed at his brother, Buddy.⁹ Other Glasses write letters (or scrawl notes on the bathroom mirror with soap) that appear, in full, in the story proper. Again, it is in the tradition of Romanticism that letters and journal entries abound in the Glass novellas. Threads reach back to Goethe, to Dorothy Wordsworth and others. In fact, Salinger was so enthralled with the Romantic concept of the letter-as-literature, that his last-published Glass story, *Hapworth 16, 1924*, is comprised entirely of one long, exceedingly precocious letter, penned by a seven-year-old summer-camp-bound Seymour Glass to his family.

The disregard for the proprieties of story form evinced by *Hapworth* is present in all of the Glass novellas. Salinger cares little for conventional notions of form in short fiction; there are no explicit 'conflicts,' 'climaxes' or even 'conclusions.' In his formlessness, (which is, in fact, a deliberate form) Salinger embodies the penchant for "organic form" first noticed in the Romantics. The narrative seems to come *through* him, rather than appearing carefully, deliberately constructed (though, in fact, the appearance of non-form *was* careful and deliberate on Salinger's part). Buddy's paragraphs (especially in *Seymour*, the most 'formless' of all) go on unapologetically for pages and pages. His sentences run on, seemingly without any end in sight, and are full of windy digressions. It is all reminiscent of a Shelley-an passion for spontaneous expression that appears to render any concern for formality or conventionality moot. Just as Shelley's poems were "idiosyncratic enough to be menacing" (Bloom 399), so has the rambling formlessness of Salinger's Glass stories rubbed many a critic the wrong way. They have

seemed, to some, disrespectful of the tenets of 'good' story writing, undisciplined, or self-indulgent. Other critics, however, appreciated their decidedly Romantic spirit of inventiveness. One considered the Glass novellas to be "a new conception of form... [that is] essentially sur-real."¹⁰ Aside from embodying the Romantic ideals of organic spontaneity and expressiveness, Salinger's novellas also privilege that confessional sense of autobiography/biography, real life appreciated by the Romantics. His narrator, Buddy, synthesizes his own autobiography (which readers are to understand somewhat mirrors Salinger's) with the biographies of his siblings. His 'true' family chronicles are interrupted by 'real' letters and 'actual' journal entries (and the aura of truth, of reality, of the narrator having 'been there,' so to speak, are all in keeping with the tradition of the novella itself, which, historically, has been a depiction of real people and true events told by someone who knows firsthand).

The threads that reach from the Glass novellas back to Romanticism are a plentiful, tangled web.

But Where Did He Get It?

How can we explain Salinger's seemingly direct descent from the Romantics? Because of his staunch reclusiveness and fierce protection of his privacy, there have been no sufficiently authoritative biographies of him (he famously put a stop to one reportedly revealing bio a few years ago, with the help of many lawyers.) Consequently, one can only make assumptions, based exclusively on his work, regarding Salinger's literary influences. The nature and content of his Glass novellas makes it clear that, at some point during either his formal or self- education, he was exposed to the

Romantics, and liked them, for he adopted and reflected their characteristics left and right.

Perhaps the most concrete clues we have were given to us in *Seymour: an Introduction*, Salinger's last, book-bound Glass story.¹¹ There, Buddy reproduces a letter once given to him by Seymour, regarding Buddy's literary aspirations. In what might be a Blakean allusion, and a reference to Buddy's as-of-yet unrealized force and fierceness as a writer, Seymour has addressed the letter, "Dear Old Tyger That Sleeps."

Later, Buddy recalls a poem written by Seymour as a young boy, which he also reproduces: "John Keats/John Keats/Please/Put Your Scarf On." Certainly, if young Seymour Glass was familiar with poor, tubercular John Keats, so, it is safe to presume, was Salinger. His degree of familiarity with Keats and all of his Romantic cohorts is reflected only in his writing. It is there and there alone we must look for the means by which to define Salinger, and it is there—his silence indicates—that he prefers us to look. The following essays seek to enact such a definition, and contextualize Salinger among those with whom he has heretofore been so hesitantly aligned: the Romantics.

Notes

¹ They appear in earlier Salinger stories, penned before he conceived the Glasses, and later conveniently lumped in with them.

² One such book is the 2001 anthology *With Love and Squalor: Fourteen Writers Respond to J.D. Salinger*, in which creative authors assess his influence on their own lives and work. (The title is a reference to Salinger's story about a precocious British girl who saves the spirit of a war-ravaged soldier, "For Esme, with Love and Squalor.")

³ These are: "The Romantic Style of Salinger's *Seymour: an Introduction*," written by John Lyons in 1963, and "Family Romances," written by David Lodge in 1975.

⁴ Salinger's contemporaneity with the Beats had led him to be either aligned with or staunchly segregated from them.

⁵ American Romantic James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* is an example of this.

⁶ The term "childism," used to describe Salinger's preoccupation with children, childhood and youth, was coined by critics Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr.

⁷ This comes from a Salinger profile in *American Writers, Volume 3*.

⁸ Salinger's antagonism toward psychiatry and analysis—a significant part of popular culture in the fifties—is evident in all of his works. Psychiatry seeks to erase genius.

⁹ They are in *Zooey* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*.

¹⁰ Ihab Hassan

¹¹ The aforementioned *Hapworth* appeared in the *New Yorker* only.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATOR/AUTHOR AMBIGUITY

Salinger's increasingly absolute, unwavering attention to his Glass chronicles was contemporaneous with his also-increasing reclusiveness. After the to-do that persisted in the years after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger retreated further and further into his own self-made cocoon, eventually abandoning (so far as we can judge by what has been published) work on anything other than his beloved Glass stories.¹ His reluctance to be a 'famous' person was emphasized by his demand that his photograph be removed from the jacket of *Catcher*, his refusal to grant any interviews, his creation of a private, self-sustaining hermitage in the country of New Hampshire, and his cantankerous lack of politeness or cooperation in response to any brave attempts—made by the press or the public—to penetrate his secretive shell. As his notoriety as a mysterious recluse increased, so did Salinger's penchant for blurring the line between himself and his adopted alter-ego/narrator, Buddy Glass—something he had, in his earlier, less notorious years, never done. In the jacket notes of *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: an Introduction*, Salinger wrote, "Oddly, the joys and satisfactions of working on the Glass family peculiarly increase and deepen for me with the years. I can't say why, though. Not, at least, outside the casino proper of my fiction." This is an explicit confession. "Yes, it is me talking," Salinger seems to say, "I, Salinger, *am* saying things; but only within the context of my art."

There are several advantages to Salinger's utilization of Buddy Glass as the narrator of his Glass novellas. Salinger endows Buddy with many characteristics that

teasingly point back to himself; through the guise of Buddy, Salinger comments on things that his readers and critics were saying about *him* in real life. In the first pages of *Zooey*, Buddy confides that the title character, his own brother, “feels that the plot (of *Zooey*, which we are to understand Buddy has penned, not Salinger) hinges on mysticism, or religious mystification—in any case, he makes it very clear, a too vividly apparent transcendental element of sorts, which he says he’s worried can only expedite, move up, the day and hour of my professional undoing.” Critics had, after the publication of *Nine Stories*, (which followed *Catcher* and preceded the Glass novellas), raised their eyebrows at Salinger’s seeming descent into matters of mysticism and spirituality, which made him something of a misunderstood anomaly among his fellow mid-century writers. (Not all critics recognized that *Catcher* itself is essentially a spiritual work--albeit one that is much more heavily clothed in realism and prosaic urbanity than subsequent writings--which made *Nine Stories* seem all the more like a jolting departure from its style.) “Teddy,” the last and, to many, most confounding of the *Nine Stories*, centers around an exceedingly precocious, realized young boy (not a Glass, though certainly a prototype for one), and is rife with God-talk. Eudora Welty, a fellow author, was one of the few critics who, in her review of *Nine Stories*, not only grasped but heralded Salinger’s meaning and message. Rather than zoom in on and stumble over what others regarded as his cumbersome mysticism, Welty shot right through to the heart of Salinger’s stories, acknowledging that “he has never...*directly* touched upon what he has the most to say about: love.”² Other critics failed to perceive this, and Salinger acknowledges them—and

confirms Welty's assertion—through the mask of Buddy. In the introductory pages of "Zooney," he writes:

People are already shaking their heads over me and any immediate further professional use on my part of the word 'God,' except as a familiar, healthy American expletive, will be taken—or, rather, confirmed—as the very worst kind of name-dropping and a sure sign that I'm going straight to the dogs. ...I know the difference between a mystical story and a love story. I say that my current offering isn't a mystical story...at all. I say it's a compound, or multiple, love story, pure and simple.

Salinger makes even more blatant use of Buddy as a mouthpiece through which he might address—even anticipate—criticism of his writing in *Seymour: an Introduction*. Ostensibly an attempted memoir of and tribute to the deceased, mythical, eldest and most wise of the Glass siblings, *Seymour* turns out to be less a case of Buddy writing about Seymour, and more a case of Buddy writing about Buddy, which is, ultimately, Salinger writing about himself. It is an acutely self-conscious work; Buddy rambles, rants, and runs off at the mouth. It consists primarily of digressions, parenthetical asides, tangents, and little about Seymour. As Buddy records his struggle to write about his brother, as well as all the mental meanderings that are part and parcel with sitting down to write anything at all, Salinger lets the reader know that *he* knows about his tendency toward long-windedness and excessive jocularity, his cheerful disregard for stylistic proprieties or neat and tidy form. These were notable qualities of *Zooney* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, and they reach a fever pitch, a self-indulgent climax, in *Seymour*. "...I privately say to you, old friend (unto you, really, I'm afraid)," Buddy writes to his imagined reader, "please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: (((()))). I suppose, most unflorally, I truly mean them to be taken,

first off, as bowlegged—buckle-legged—omens of my state of mind and body at this writing.”³ Another typical aside reads, “let me not screen every damned sentence, for once in my life, or I’m through again.” In *Seymour*, the last of the book-bound Glass novellas, Salinger allowed himself to acknowledge things about his style, as Buddy, that he had never mentioned in any interview as himself. *Seymour* is certainly an exaggeration, perhaps a parody, of Salinger’s sometimes-maligned self-indulgent talkiness. Salinger says much, behind the veil of Buddy, within the “casino proper of [his] fiction.” In blurring the line between his narrator and himself—a vaguely cheeky device utilized by many Romantic authors—he can express his own self-awareness as a writer, and accomplish the Romantic infusion of reality into art.

Reality—or a potent sense of it—is one of the defining characteristics of a novella. And the novella itself was a form used and popularized by Romantic writers [see chapter seven on “Form(lessness) and Silence”]. The novella is, traditionally, an anecdote about people the author himself knows or has know of—a ‘real’ narrator telling a ‘true’ tale. Other offshoots of or commonly used forms in the Romantic genre include: the autobiography, the (fictional) memoir, the epistolary tale, the journal intime, and the first-person narrative. These sub-genres typically appear within Romantic novellas; they all figure in Salinger’s Glass novellas, thanks, in part, to his donning of the Buddy Glass mask.

In all of the novellas, Buddy enables Salinger to infuse his stories with the sense of reality, the sense of *this really happened*, that is so crucial to a Romantic novella. Through Buddy, Salinger composes the traditionally Romantic first-person narrative, the

fictional memoir. So effective was his use of this adopted narrator, this alter-ego, Salinger had many readers believing that the Glasses were, in fact, real people. Buddy is a Glass; he has intimate knowledge of the events and people he writes about. Buddy can say, “*I was there*” or “*I was told these things by those who were*”. (“Almost all the facts to follow...” he writes in *Zooey*, “were originally given to me in hideously spaced installments, and in, to me, somewhat harrowingly private sittings, by the three player-characters themselves.”) *Zooey* is a “prose home movie” which Buddy composes after hearing from “those who have seen the footage.” He presents himself as someone who records and re-tells actual occurrences, intermixed with autobiographical details about his own life. In *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, Buddy gives “an account of a wedding day [that of Seymour] in 1942.” On the same page as the afore-quoted sentence, there are three more mentions of specific dates, times and places, and countless more on the pages that follow. (“...the bridegroom is now, in 1955, no longer living. He committed suicide in 1948 while he was on vacation in Florida with his wife. ... In late May of 1942, the progeny...of Les and Bessie Glass were flung...all over the United States. ... Seymour and I were the first to appear on the show [“It’s a Wise Child”], back in 1927, at the respective ages of ten and eight...”) These insertions give Buddy credence as a ‘true,’ and ‘truthful,’ narrator. In *Zooey*, his citation of specific dates and times (“Ten thirty on a Monday morning in November of 1955, Zooey Glass, a young man of twenty-five, was sitting in a very full bath, reading a four-year-old letter”) enhances the sense of actuality, accuracy and immediacy, and did so especially when the story was first published in 1957. Buddy reprints ‘actual’ letters in their entirety for the

reader; thus giving the novellas their epistolary—not to mention ‘true life’--element. He does the same with journal entries that he has ‘found’. [See chapter five, “Letters and Journals”.] Of the letter he reprints in *Zooey*, Buddy writes, “The style of [it], I’m told, bears a considerable resemblance to the style, or written mannerisms, of this narrator, and the general reader will no doubt jump to the heady conclusion that the writer of the letter and I are one and the same person. Jump he will, I’m afraid, and jump he should.” Buddy and his letter stand as symbols for Salinger and his adopted narrator. Just as the reader can identify the similarity in mannerism and style between Buddy’s letter and his prose, so can she perceive the likeness between ‘Buddy’s’ prose and Salinger’s (as it stood in his pre-Buddy works). Through Buddy’s encouragement of the reader to make the connection between what is ostensibly ‘real’ (Buddy) and what is in the ‘story’ (the letter), Salinger playfully beckons her to go ahead and conclude that Buddy is a stand in for himself. This lends a profound multidimensionality to the Glass novellas.

I can recall a possession of mine—a lunch box, in fact—that, at the age of about eight or nine, evoked in my the same spine-tingling awareness of depth of field, of many co-existing planes, that the Glass novellas did years later. This lunch box was—and is, in my memory—a kind of tangible, physical representation of the multi-dimensionality of Salinger’s stories. It was quite a point of pride for my third-grade self, because it had a real, functioning radio built into it, complete with little knobs to navigate between channels. It was emblazoned with the image of a bear—a teddy bear, to be precise—listening, of all things, to a radio lunch box that looked just like the one *I* had. The radio lunch box that the bear was listening to also had an image on *it* of a

bear—*another* bear—listening to a radio lunch box. And if I squinted and looked closely enough, I could see that *that* bear's radio lunch box had a bear listening to a radio lunch box on *it*... "There are so many layers...this could keep going on forever and ever!" I thought, vaguely nauseated and disturbed, nearly overturning my lunch-buddy's carton of tater tots in my realization.

Certainly, Salinger could have just as easily written about the Glasses as himself. Instead, he made a choice to use a narrator who *mirrored* himself. We aren't just reading about Franny, Zooey and Seymour Glass; upon taking a step back, we see that we are reading *Buddy*--the intimate, the sibling, the informed narrator--*writing* about Franny, Zooey and Seymour. Taking a second step back, we perceive that we are reading *Salinger* writing about *Buddy* writing about Franny, Zooey, and Seymour. Salinger simultaneously achieves two seemingly discordant things in utilizing Buddy: he *distances* and *removes* himself from his fiction by putting an interlocutor, a barrier, a veil--in the form of a made-up narrator--between himself and it; and he puts himself directly, bravely *into* his fiction by making that narrator such an obvious stand-in for himself, and offering so many hints that encourage the reader to deduce he and Buddy are one and the same. It is a delicate achievement. He maintains the anonymity, the near-invisibility, to which he holds so furiously fast while, at the same time, inserting himself into his fiction in a way that is more bare, bold, vulnerable self-aware and self-conscious than even the most blatantly "I"-oriented, confessional writers. In blurring the line between himself and Buddy Glass, Salinger manifests one of the primary characteristics of the Romantic movement: the perception of life *as* art; the translation of life *into* art. Salinger published

his writings, but he was so tight-lipped, so very guarded of his own life and possessive of his privacy. Therefore, it can be deduced that he wanted only his art, his fiction, to stand as the expression of himself into the world—not the paltry, trivial details of his existence. And the Glass novellas, because of his ingenious use of the narrator Buddy, are a beautiful, kaleidoscopic synthesis of reality and art. In keeping with the Romantic way of narratizing real life, of stylizing and poeticizing reality, Buddy narrates the ‘real’ lives of the Glasses and converts them into “prose home movies”; through Buddy, and the stories Buddy writes, Salinger narratizes, stylizes and poeticizes himself.

Notes

¹ In a *New York Times* review of *Franny and Zooey*, John Updike writes, “Their [the Glasses] invention has become a hermitage for him.”

² Welty’s review appeared in the 5 April, 1953 issue of *The New York Times*.

³ David Seed wrote favorably about Salinger’s much-maligned attempts to “break through the unavoidable deceits of fiction” in his article “Keeping it in the Family: The Novellas of J.D. Salinger”—which appears in the text *The Modern American Novella*. While some critics have disparaged Salinger’s inadvertent undermining of his narratives with his self-conscious interjections, Seed heralds Salinger’s ability to “skillfully convert his character’s anxieties about their identity into problems of fictional representation.”

CHAPTER 3

CHILDHOOD/YOUTH

Children are an indispensable presence in Salinger's fiction. To erase each and every one of their affectionately drawn figures from the figurative mural of his works would result in a proverbial blank slate, an expanse of near-emptiness, peppered by a few sad-eyed, lost-looking adults—miserable and unenlightened because there are no precocious prepubescents around to show them the way. Those critics who acknowledged that the central theme of Salinger's work is love wrote that "everyone able to love in Salinger's stories is either a child or a man influenced by a child."¹ In its brief tidbit on Salinger, the reference title, *Something About the Author*, mentions his overriding focus on "childhood, adolescence or youth as both an object of interest itself and as a thematic lever by means of which the nature of the wider world could be pried open."

In some instances, this influence, this illumination—or "prying open" of the nature of things—enacted by Salinger's children extends beyond the confines of the page and reaches out of the fiction and into the reality of the reader herself. When I was fourteen and still something of a child in my own right, I was sitting on my bed, in my room, with the door closed (as it often was, to my mother's chagrin) reading (as I always was, also to the chagrin of my mother, who had a notion that I would "ruin" my eyes) "Teddy," a selection from Salinger's *Nine Stories*. I will never forget the sensation that overtook me after absorbing a certain comment made by the ten-year-old title character; it was as if the top of my head was lifted ecstatically off. "I was sitting in the kitchen watching my baby sister drink her glass of milk," Teddy recounts, "when all at once I

saw that the *milk* was God, and *she* was God, and it was just God pouring into God.” To some, this sounds like nonsensical mysticism; to my fourteen-year-old self, it was a dose of vitality injected right into my perception of life, wherein, before, things had been merely *things* and nothing more. Now, I turned my eyes away from the pages of my book, and it seemed as though everything, even the bed on which I sat, was humming with a potent, omnipresent intelligence and vitality. Life!; Salinger’s children are either intoxicated by it, hyper-aware of its resplendence, or small-statured embodiments of the love and vitality that vibrate always beneath its surface (as Seymour Glass would say, “the main current of poetry that runs through things, all things”).

The Glass siblings, when recalled as children, are portrayed as all of the above. We know, by virtue of their appearance on the radio quiz show, “It’s a Wise Child”, that they are wise. We do not know, exactly, *why* they are so ‘wise’ as children; Salinger makes a point of presenting their parents, ex-vaudevillians Les and Bessie Glass, as regular folks, hopelessly *human* beings, of normal intelligence and with none of the ethereality of their progeny. (Les is sentimental; he plasters old scrapbooks chronicling his children’s years as radio celebrities directly into the walls of their apartment. When his daughter, Franny, undergoes a psycho-spiritual crisis on the family sofa, all he can think to do is repeatedly offer her tangerines. Bessie is equally uncomprehending of Franny’s plight, and betrays a vaguely bourgeois simple-mindedness similar to her husband’s with her unrelenting focus on the healing power of consecrated chicken soup.) Accepting that the Glass children have not inherited their wisdom from their parents, (it is clear that the eldest, Seymour, had a great influence over the others, but why was *he*

born so wise? See chapter four on “Seymour: The Sage and Seer”), the reader can deduce that it is an *inherent* quality, something they were *born* with, imparted to them by a source other than their physical, earthly parents.

The notion of a bottommost inner life or light, a core self, inherent, mysterious and elusive, was one widely adopted by the early Romantics; as was the idea that children, by virtue of their more recent birth and consequent close proximity to God, or the divine source of all life, had a potent abundance of this inner light, this inherent wisdom or divinity.¹ Adults, who have endured the travails of life and the deadening effects of an artificial, mechanized society, lack the vitality and goodness of children, but can access it via the instructive, invigorating presence of a child in their lives. This notion and theme is reflected again and again in Salinger’s neo-Romantic stories. Holden Caulfield is given reprieve from his existential misery only by his little, precocious sister, Phoebe. (Being no longer a child, but a young adult, Holden is poised painfully on the delicate threshold between all that Salinger holds dear, represented by children, and all the artificiality and phoniness he despises, embodied by the world of adults.) Sergeant X, in “For Esme, with Love and Squalor,” is ultimately healed of his psychic war wounds by the young title character. Seymour Glass spends the minutes before his suicide (his decision to exit the world entirely) on the beach, playing in the water with a small child named Sybil (who’s chief loves, reflecting her innocence and simplicity, are olives and wax).

Salinger alternates between endowing the very simplicity, the most common, minute gestures of his children with a sense of preciousness, and, in the case of the

Glasses as children, assigning them not simplicity but unusual complexity and atypical behavior which *also* lends them a preciousness, a specialness, a goodness or Godliness. Whether he is highlighting the “pretty” way Esme stands with her feet close together, detailing the words Phoebe Caulfield has written in her typical, schoolgirlish notebook (“*Please pass to Shirley!!!! Shirley you said you were sagitarius but your only taurus bring your skates when you come over to my house*”), or mentioning Sybill’s childish protruding belly or her babyish predilections (“I like to chew candles”), the message is always the same: even in their most common qualities and gestures, it is apparent that children have something grown ups don’t.

Innocence intermingled with precocity is Salinger’s favorite blend, and he exploits the two qualities with unabashed indulgence in the Glass children. Not all critics responded gamely. Many asserted it was impossible to render such ethereal, uncommon characters sympathetically. It has been noted, in a distinctly incisive work of criticism by fellow author John Updike, that Salinger himself commits the foible of what Seymour defines as sentimentality—to give a thing “more tenderness than God gives it”—because he “loves the Glasses more than God loves them. He loves them too exclusively.”³ While Salinger might have adored his youthful “geniuses...so sensitive and clever and superior to other mortals...so infernally cute”, some found them alienating.⁴ It is this very aura of magic, of specialness, of almost-unreality around the Glasses that, in part, lends their stories a Romantic quality. [And, on the flip side, the Glass chronicles struck many readers as being so true, so *real*, that there was much disappointment upon discovering the Glasses were purely fictional people (see chapter one on “Author/Narrator

Ambiguity”)]. Romanticism is characterized by a strange blending of very prosaic, true-to-life things with magical, ethereal or transcendent ones. The Zooey whom we witness, in staggering detail, going through the most hopelessly human, workaday ablutions (bathing, shaving, dropping cigarette ashes in his bathwater, etc.) is the same Zooey who asserts that, when he was eight years old, he had a glass of ginger ale with Jesus in the kitchen. We learn that Franny, as a young child, used to fly all around the Glasses apartment. How does she know she wasn't dreaming? Her proof was no less plain than the dust on her fingertips from touching all the light bulbs. At ten, Franny is already abandoning the teachings of Jesus, who doesn't love animals enough, for those of Buddah. At age seven, Seymour pens a letter home to Les and Bessie from summer camp (the never book-bound epistolary novella, *Hapworth 16, 1926*) that is so verbose, patronizing, so demonstrative of a stunningly advanced intellect that many critics threw up their arms in exasperation at Salinger's daring, as if to say “Does he really expect us to believe this stuff?” Seymour, at the age of twelve, permanently disfigures the object of his affection, Charlotte, by throwing a rock at her. This act is done not out of malice but, on the contrary, out of a complex, inexplicable reaction to her beauty. The sight of her loveliness, crouched on the driveway, petting a cat, stirs Seymour, the poet-child, and the rock is thrown almost involuntarily.

Few, if any, authors have ever ascribed such complexity—or paid such attention—to children in their works as Salinger. The children of *Nine Stories*⁵ and *Catcher* have the power to alter the environs, and the adults, around them with their innocence and simplicity. The joy Salinger takes in rendering them is palpable in the text.

The Glass children are endowed with powers of perception and depth of feeling that elude most adults. In the fashion of a true Romantic, Salinger posits, again and again, that the only way to acquire that “mystical joy [that is] transcendent over the modern wasteland and its agony”⁶ is to be near a child, or like a child. They, children, are the wise ones, possessive of inherent, God-given genius, who (as the name “Glass” indicates) let in the light so that others may see more clearly.

Notes

¹ Critics Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. elaborate on what they term Salinger’s “childism” in their article “J.D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff”, which appears in the compilation *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 12.

¹ These and other characteristics of Romanticism are detailed in the introduction to *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography: Rousseau and Goethe*, by Eugene Stelzig.

³ Updike’s review of *Franny and Zooey* appeared in the 17 September, 1961 issue of The New York Times. He makes many novel assertions about Salinger’s work therein; notably, that the Franny of “Franny” and the Franny of “Zooey” are not the same girl.

⁴ Orville Prescott introduced his 28 January, 1963 New York Times review of *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: an Introduction* by citing these as some of the reasons why certain, stubborn Salinger opponents (whom he collectively labels “old sour puss”) disliked the Glasses.

⁵ In her glowing review of *Nine Stories*, which appeared in the 5 April, 1953 issue of The New York Times, fellow author Eudora Welty writes: “The stories concern children a good deal of the time, but they are God’s children. Mr. Salinger’s work deals with innocence, and starts with innocents... [The stories] all pertain to the lack of something in the world, and it might be said that what Mr. Salinger has written about so far is the absence of love. Owing to that absence comes the spoilation of innocence...”.

⁶ This apt description of Salinger’s overriding theme appears in an article on him in *American Writers*, Vol. 3.

CHAPTER 4

MYSTICISM

Confusion is sometimes the predominant feeling when readers come to the concluding pages of Salinger's novella, *Zooey*, in which the title character bestows a healing revelation upon his spiritually wayward younger sister, Franny. "...I'll tell you a terrible secret," he says, in his distinctive, urban Zooey-ese,

—Are you listening to me? *There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady*. That includes your Professor Tupper, buddy. And all his goddamn cousins by the dozens. There isn't anyone *anywhere* that isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. Don't you know that? Don't you know that goddamn secret yet? And don't you know—*listen* to me, now—*don't you know who that Fat Lady really is?* ... Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy.

What, many wonder, on earth does Jesus have to do with a made-up figure—known as the Fat Lady--invented by Seymour Glass who exists in the imaginations of his siblings? And why, furthermore, does Franny Glass—whom we have witnessed going through a breakdown of sorts on her family's living room sofa, insistently bent on repeating a phrase known as the Jesus Prayer—feel so much better upon hearing these words from her brother?

To better understand the conclusion of *Zooey*, one has to be familiar with Salinger's brand of mysticism. It runs like a thread through a majority of his works, sometimes implicitly, sometimes as the center of a story (as is the case with *Zooey*). 'Pantheistic'—though insufficient--is a word that comes close to describing it. To hold a pantheistic view is to believe that all things—all people, everything in the world—are an

expression of God, and are inextricably interconnected. Traditional Romantic authors subscribed to this idea, particularly with regard to nature, often portraying it as the most pure, earthly manifestation of divinity. Romantic writing is not Romantic without the infusion of spirituality, a “quasi-pantheistic view” of the world.¹ Salinger, as a consequence to the tenets of Eastern spirituality that had personally influenced him (years before the Beat writers got hold of them²), did not reserve this pantheistic perception for nature alone but, rather beautifully, extended it to human beings.

The Fat Lady is more than a mysterious personage for whom Seymour beseeches his younger siblings to always go the figurative extra mile when it comes to performing on the “It’s a Wise Child” radio quiz show. (Zooney is told to shine his shoes, which no one at all will see in the “Wise Child” studio, for her.) She is a vaguely grotesque, unappealing figure who, in the minds of Franny and Zooney both, sits “on [her] porch all day, swatting flies, with her radio going full blast from morning till night,” with “very thick legs, very veiny...in her *awful* wicker chair.” Yet, as Zooney has come to learn, and as he passes on to his sister, the imagined Fat Lady is, in reality, a solitary stand-in for, or representation of, the whole of humanity. There is not anyone anywhere, he says, who is *not* her. Moreover, the Fat Lady is also, Zooney says, Christ (who, to most mid-century American readers of Salinger’s fiction, was the expression of God in the world). Therefore, if the Fat Lady is “Christ Himself”, and the Fat Lady is also everyone—even those whom we despise, such as Franny’s pretentious Professor Tupper—then everyone, everyone everywhere, is Christ, or God. Franny’s relief and gladness upon grasping this come from her understanding that she cannot say the Jesus Prayer with any semblance of

sincerity while at the same time despising people and institutions she deems fake or unrealized, such as her Professor Tupper, her university, or acting--for which she has, as Zooney would call it, a God-given gift. She cannot say the Jesus prayer when she doesn't know who she is saying it to, because everything, even the things Franny thinks she hates, is the Fat Lady: an expression of Christ.

Salinger's mysticism evinced itself before the publication of the Glass novellas. Teddy, the title character of the final tale in *Nine Stories*, is a ten-year-old genius who believes that his younger sister is just as much God as the milk she drinks, and that the perception that one's arm stops--and that there is space between where it and another person's arm begins—is illusory. The illusion of separateness—from other people and from God—is one Teddy posits has resulted from “Logic”, which interferes greatly with seeing the true nature of things. “You know that apple Adam ate in the Garden of Eden, referred to in the Bible?” he asks one of the grown-up intellectuals to whom he is a curiosity. “You know what was in that apple? Logic. Logic and intellectual stuff. That was all that was in it. So—this is my point—what you have to do is vomit it up if you want to see things as they really are. ... You won't see everything stopping *off* all the time. And you'll know what your arm really is, if you're interested.” Teddy, who has successfully vomited up his apple, and has forgone—in a decidedly Romantic fashion—the interference of the intellect and logic for more abstract, penetrating modes of perception--does see the interconnectedness of all things and people, In contrast to traditional Western Christian thought, he does not perceive God as a separate being to which the whole of humanity, all life on earth, must strive—albeit, with perpetual lack of

success--to be close; he sees everyone and everything *as* God. Like Salinger himself, who has practiced Advaita Vendanta Hinduism for many years,³ Teddy has spiritual leanings that are more Eastern than Western. This might account for why some readers, being familiar with and products of Western religious philosophy, have at times failed to grasp Salinger's meaning and dismissed his writing as God-obsessed.⁴ Salinger held fast to his mysticism, undeterred. The Glass Novellas, and Seymour Glass in particular, are so steeped in it that some critics have asserted "Salinger is allied, in a basic way, to the joyful mysticism of Whitman... it is clear that his tastes (and his themes) are more closely akin to the affirmative poetry of the mystical tradition".⁵

An assortment of quotations peppered the bulletin board I kept in my bedroom as a very young adolescent. These were affixed in such a place because they were the things that I liked to read over again and again. Often, upon entering or exiting my room, I would pause to peruse them where they hung, near my door. Among these was a quote from Marcus Aurelius: "It loved to happen." This, of course, was garnered from a Salinger novella; is one of the many quotations with which Seymour Glass, along with his brother, Buddy, has emblazoned the back of his bedroom door. What is the "it" of the quote, the "it" that loves to happen? If we are to interpret it in accordance with Salinger's pantheistic mysticism, "it" is life—or, more specifically, God, since all life is expressive of God—taking pleasure in its own unfolding, its own constant manifestation. There was, to me, something celebratory and joyful in these few words.

It is the very knowledge and perception of this "it" that is so often burdensome to the Glasses as they try to negotiate their awareness of "it" with existing in a world

wherein most people have firmly donned blinders to what Seymour terms "the current of poetry that runs through all things." (See chapter four on "Seymour: the Sage and Seer.") "We're freaks," Zooey says of his siblings and himself. Critic Arthur Mizener writes, "...the hard thing [is] not to find out 'what it is all about,' which the Glass children have know from very early, but 'how to live it.' Knowing what it is all about, in fact, is the burden."⁶ Mysticism is not just one of the defining characteristics of Salinger's fiction; it also serves as the source of inner conflict for the character's therein.

Yet, although there is an element of struggle within the Glasses spiritual sharp-sightedness (Seymour's suicide, more than anything, evinces this), there is also, to a greater extent, something ecstatic and life affirming in it. Salinger's mysticism "suggests a return to the enthusiasms of the early nineteenth century, when it was a bliss in that dawn to be alive".⁷ Through it, he has not only given fictional representation of a facet of his own life and spirituality, nor has he merely sought to preach an ideal of love and Eastern-tinged God-awareness to his readers. He has infused his work with a quality that few authors--besides the Romantics of more than a century before him--have succeeded in creating: the celebration of and delight in life, and in the beauty and holiness that are implicitly threaded through the fabric of life. In Salinger's work, there are no grandly presented mystical experiences, no glorious face-to-face confrontations with God. His mysticism is relegated to small things. God is a bloated old Fat Lady. God is a glass of milk. Jesus drinks ginger ale in the kitchen with an eight-year-old Zooey. Bessie Glass's repeated offering of consecrated chicken soup to her daughter, Franny, is a "religious action." The contents of Bessie's voluminous pockets--presented in as much attentive,

infinitesimal detail as the insides of the family's medicine cabinet and the features of their cluttered living room--are the stuff of life. Salinger seizes upon the most prosaic, seemingly trivial doo-dads, knick-knacks and occurrences, and—in showering them with such detailed description—asks that we look, really Look at them. We are asked to Notice. We are asked to See. For it is in these small things, (the seconds-long, joyful reunion of a dog with its temporarily hidden child-mistress that Zooey witnesses out the living room window), seemingly inconsequential and everyday, that “It”—the ever-present, all-penetrating, glad humming of God—resides.

Notes

¹ Eugene Stelzig writes about pantheistic spirituality with regard to Romanticism in *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography: Rousseau and Goethe*

² Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg made Eastern spirituality mainstream when they adopted Buddhism and Zen Buddhism in their texts; Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*—which Salinger poked fun of in *Seymour: an Introduction*--is one example. Salinger did not in any way want to be affiliated with the Beats. Although they shared, in the words of Warren French (see book below), “his criticism of the...dehumanizing tactics of Madison Avenue and sought a spiritual solution to the time's malaise in traditional Eastern religious doctrines, Salinger shunned the spotlight that the Beats courted...”

³ Warren French presents this, and other little-known biographical information, in his book *J.D. Salinger Revisited*.

⁴ Salinger, in the guise of Buddy Glass, refers to his image as a God-obsessed writer: “People are already shaking their heads over me, and any immediate further professional use on my part of the word ‘God,’ except as a familiar, healthy American expletive, will be taken—or rather confirmed—as the very worst kind of name-dropping and a sure sign that I’m going to the dogs.” (Note that he ends this sentence with the noun ‘dog’—an anagram of ‘god’.) Salinger-as-Buddy asserted that Zooey was not “a mystical story...at all” but “a...love story, pure and simple.” From this statement one can garner that Salinger didn’t want his mysticism to be viewed as simply that—mysticism; it seems the final goal of this mysticism—and the heart of all his stories—is the perception and realization of the omnipresence of love in an at times ugly world.

⁵ Salinger is likened to Whitman, and others of a mystical bend, in the article about him in *American Writers, Vol. 3*.

⁶ Mizener's article is entitled “The Love Song of J.D. Salinger” and appears in *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 12*.

⁷ John O. Lyons is one of only two critics that explicitly liken Salinger's style to that of the Romantics in his article “The Romantic Style of Salinger's ‘Seymour: an Introduction’”—which appeared in the Winter of 1963 issue of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*.

CHAPTER 5

SEYMOUR: THE SAGE AND SEER

“See more glass,” is the way young Sybill, the child with whom Seymour Glass plays on beach in the minutes preceding his suicide, misunderstands his name in the story “A Perfect Day For Bananafish.” Salinger is telling us, through Sybill, why he chose the name he did for the central figure of his Glass stories.

“Did you see more glass?” she asks her mother, a quintessentially Salingerian grown-up, who replies, “Pussycat, stop saying that. It’s driving Mommy absolutely crazy.” Sybill’s is a telling query, and an apt distortion of Seymour’s name, because, if there is one quality that sets Seymour apart, marginally from his siblings and markedly from most people, it is that he sees more. Seymour, the saintly seer, sees so much, takes in so much of the stuff of life (see chapter three on “Mysticism”), is so filled beyond the brim with the almost-painful complexity and depth of his perceptions, that he, as Sybill’s mother’s reply hints, is driven beyond any socially-condoned definition of normalcy. Yes, Seymour does “see more”, and he is driven “absolutely crazy” by his own hyper-awareness.

The bananafish from whom the story—the first of Glass tales¹—takes its name are imaginary creatures around which Seymour centers a fanciful tale he tells Sybill. “You just keep your eyes open for bananafish,” he tells the child who has made his acquaintance during his vacation at a beach resort in Florida. He pushes her on an inflatable raft in the ocean and says, “This is a perfect day for bananafish.” When Sybill says she does not see any, Seymour replies, “That’s understandable. Their habits are very

peculiar. They lead a very tragic life. You know what they do, Sybill? ...they swim into a hole where there's a lot of bananas. They're very ordinary-looking fish when they swim *in*. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas. Naturally, after that they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again. Can't fit through the door." To Sybill's inquiry as to what becomes of the overstuffed bananafish, Seymour replies, "Oh, you mean after they eat so many bananas they can't get out of the banana hole? Well, I hate to tell you, Sybill. They die."

Contrary to many misinterpretations of the significance of this story-within-the-story, the bananafish are not simply a whimsical creation by Seymour meant to entertain his young companion. Nor are they phallic and the banana holes vaginal.² They are also not, as some critics have posited, symbolic of a gluttonous, materialistic society Seymour finds it unbearable to live in.³ They are representative of Seymour himself, and Seymour knows as much while he talks about them. Seymour is like the bananafish who have swum "into their holes" and filled themselves to the point of no return; he has gone so far down his spiritual path that he can go no further, nor can he simply empty himself of all that has filled him and be "normal." He has been greedy in his own way; he has been greedy for the stuff of life, not material stuff, but the ever-present hum of God, "the current of poetry that runs through things, all things." In later stories we will learn of his capacity to perceive and feel beauty in the most minute, everyday bits of life. It is beyond his control. Seymour is so far in, he can't get out; he "can't fit through the door." Like the bananafish, the inevitable end for Seymour is death. In his ode to his elder brother,

“Seymour: an Introduction”, Salinger’s alter ego, Buddy Glass, echoes the plight of the bananafish in describing the demise of Seymour. Seymour, he says, is “the true artist-seer, the heavenly fool who can and does produce beauty, is mainly dazzled to death by his own scruples, the blinding shapes and colors of his own sacred human conscience.” Just as the bananafish are stuffed to death by their appetite for bananas, so is Seymour “dazzled to death” by his own blindingly beautiful, too-potent perception of life.

Many people have Seymour-esque moments. Recently, I myself had a few days where I felt like the fictional Seymour. Everything seemed to vibrate with loveliness; everything—the sight of strangers talking to each other, the telephone poles lining the road, the sounds coming through the radio, a piece of old rusty tin found in the yard, all of the multitudinous facets of life, the things of the world—seemed infused with beauty. This is not an altogether pleasurable feeling; it rends one’s heart to be continually inundated with beauty and know that it needn’t be there, none of it need exist but for some inconceivable generosity on the part of the unseen intelligence that creates and governs all. It got to a point where I dreaded going for a bike ride down my own street; I knew I was in the mood where every blade of grass, every scent, every *thing* my senses took in would impress itself upon me with almost painful insistency. When one sees, Sees things so much for what they are, and in their fullness and inherent beauty, it can hurt to look at them. Fortunately for myself and many others, stages like these are just that: stages. If we were to see, really see, all things all the time, truly attentively see, truly take in and process each and every one of the stimuli that pass by us in life, we would cease to function normally. We would go crazy. Most of us are protected from swimming so deep

into that figurative hole that we can't swim out again by barriers in our own brains, distractions we create, egos. We go about our business, noticing enough to take pleasure in life, but not so much that we feel filled to the brim and immobilized, dazzled to death.

The path that Seymour walks toward his eventual self-obliteration is chronicled in the Glass stories that appeared subsequent to "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," where he is brought back to life in the form of letters, journal entries (see chapter five on same) and recollections by his siblings, whom he haunts. Seymour, we learn, was not always entrapped by the "blinding shapes and colors" of his conscience; he was a saintly guru, a teacher in the highest sense of the word to his six younger siblings. The figure of the Sage, who graces the lives of those around him and who has something to teach, is common to traditional Romantic works, as it that of the Genius, wherein the "creative, sensitive, pathological and morbid are never far apart."⁴ Salinger has adopted both of these Romantic figures and synthesized them into one: Seymour. Of Seymour's role in the Glass family, his brother Buddy writes: "He was a great many things to a great many people while he lived, and virtually all things to his brothers and sisters in our somewhat outsized family. Surely he was all *real* things to us: our blue-striped unicorn, our double-lensed burning glass, our consultant genius, our portable conscience, our supercargo, and our one full poet..."

The persona of a sage is all the more animate when presented through the recollections of those who were near to him in his life (the New Testament is a testament to this.) Buddy writes: "While my distinguished relative lived, I watched him—almost literally, I sometimes think—like a hawk." It is by virtue of Buddy's powers of

observation and memory that we, as readers of his family Romances, are afforded a picture of Seymour as a Sage and Seer. Buddy gives us a vision of a young Seymour, “still in knee pants, being examined by a reputable group of professional Freudians for six hours and forty-five minutes.” He tells us that “from the time Seymour was ten years old, every *summa cum laude* Thinker and intellectual men’s room attendant in the country had been having a go at him.” We learn that Seymour had the longest-running stint on the “It’s a Wise Child” quiz show, had been a “national radio celebrity for some six years of his boyhood,” and that “of all the Glass children, [he] had been the ‘best’ to hear, the most consistently ‘rewarding.’” Further evidence of his genius lies in the information that “he’d been a freshman at Columbia when he’d just turned fifteen,” and a full professor of English by his very early twenties. *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* is introduced with Buddy’s memory of a seventeen-year old Seymour reading a fussy, crib-bound baby Franny Glass an ancient Taoist tale. We know that it is reading material such as this, part of the spiritual education Seymour imparted to the younger Glasses in their most formative years, that causes Zooey to say about himself and his siblings “We’re freaks, that’s all. Those two bastards [Seymour and the second-eldest, Buddy] got us nice and early and made us into freaks with freakish standards.” Most of the time the Glass children’s attitude toward Seymour is not resentful, but reverent. It is Seymour who, along with “St. Francis of Assisi and Heidi’s Grandfather,” comprises Franny’s personal idea of Jesus, and Seymour whom she wants to “talk to” while in the throes of her spiritual confusion. Buddy laments the fact that “not one God-damn person, of all the patronizing, fourth-rate critics and column writers, had ever seen him for what

he really was. A poet, for God's sake. And I mean a *poet*. If he never wrote a line of poetry, he could still flash what he had at you with the back of his ear if he wanted to." Seymour did write several lines of poetry—in the style of a modified Japanese haiku—one of which appears copied in a letter written from Buddy to Zooey in the beginning of *Zooey*: "The little girl on the plane/Who turned her doll's head around/To look at me." In *Seymour: an Introduction*, Buddy confesses that he has, since Seymour's death, "been sitting...on a loose-leaf notebook inhabited by a hundred and eighty-four short poems that my brother wrote during the last three years of his life." Buddy's presentation of Seymour as the family genius, poet and teacher is best encapsulated by the pair of sentences that draw his memoir of and "Introduction" to Seymour to a close: "Seymour once said that all we do our whole lives is go from one little piece of Holy Ground to the next. Is he *never* wrong?" We learn more about the Sage—and grow more attached to him--via his brother's writing than we ever would if the Sage himself were the narrator of the Glass stories.

It is when the Sage speaks for himself, however, in the form of his found journal entries, that he most emerges as a Seer, a character who cannot be even a little blind to life, though he might be helped if he could be. "If or when I do start going to an analyst," he writes in one entry,

I hope to God he has the foresight to let a dermatologist sit in on consultation. A hand specialist. I have scars on my hands from touching certain people. Once, in the park, when Franny was still in the carriage, I put my hand on the downy pate of her head and left it there too long. Another time, at Lowe's Seventy Second Street, with Zooey during a spooky movie. He was a bout six or seven, and he went under the seat to avoid watching a scary scene. I put my hand on his head. Certain heads, certain colors and textures of human hair leave permanent marks on me.

Other things, too. Charlotte once ran away from me, outside the studio, and I grabbed her dress to stop her, to keep her near me. A yellow cotton dress I loved because it was too long for her. I still have a lemon-yellow mark on the palm of my right hand. Oh, God, if I'm anything by a clinical name, I'm a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy.

Seymour is acutely *present*. He is so sensitive and aware of gestures so simple as fleetingly touching the persons of loved ones, that the most seemingly irrelevant actions and moments of life--which, for others, would flicker by unnoticed and unrecalled--leave their mark on him (be it real or imagined). It is millions upon millions of moments like this, stored inside the Seer's heart, that ultimately render him unfit for the world. As Buddy recounts,

By every logical definition, he *was* an unhealthy specimen, he *did* on his worst nights and late afternoons give out not only cries of pain but cries for help, and when nominal help arrived, he *did* decline to say in an intelligible language where it hurt. ... where does...the bulk, the whole ambulance load, of pain really come from? Where *must* it come from? Isn't the true poet or painter a seer? Isn't he, actually, the only seer we have on earth? Forgive me; I'm nearly finished with this. In a seer, what part of the human anatomy would necessarily be required to take the most abuse? The *eyes*, certainly. ... However contradictory the coroner's report—whether he pronounces Consumption or Loneliness or Suicide to be the cause of death—isn't it plain to see how the true artist-seer actually dies?

Like a bananafish, Seymour takes in too much. True Seers and Sages--not only in the Romantic tradition, but the mythological and religious ones as well—are but sparks in the world. They rarely grace it for long; it either undoes them, or they undo themselves, or, as in the case of Seymour, both. Seymour's death, and the details of his life, give him a crucial place in the Glass novellas. His ghost hovers over them; he is both never-

present, and everpresent, and consequently, he lingers in the reader's consciousness like moments do on his saintly palms.

Notes

¹ "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is the first of the *Nine Stories*. It is not a novella. It is likely that Salinger decided to make the Seymour Glass of "Bananafish" the central figure of his family Romances only *after* the former was written. In *Seymour: an Introduction*, Salinger's stand-in/narrator, Buddy Glass, reveals that it was *he* who wrote "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" about his older brother some years earlier. He explains the slight difference in characterization between the Seymour of "Bananafish" and the Seymour of the later Glass novellas by reporting that his own siblings found fault with the earlier story because "...the young man, the 'Seymour' who did the walking and talking in that early story... was not Seymour at all but, oddly, someone with a striking resemblance to—alley oop, I'm afraid—myself. Which is true, I think, or true enough to make me feel a craftsman's ping of reproof." This is one of the many instances where Salinger uses Buddy as a tool or mouthpiece to account for inconsistencies that critics and readers might have picked up on.

² John Wenke attributes this theory to Dallas E. Wiebe in his book *J.D. Salinger: a Study of the Short Fiction*.

³ In *J.D. Salinger Revisited*, Warren French posits that Seymour believes he has given himself "banana fever" by "succumbing to materialistic temptations." Nowhere in "Bananafish"—or in any subsequent stories—is Seymour portrayed as a materialistic character.

⁴ From Eugene Stelzig's *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography: Rousseau and Goethe*.

CHAPTER 6

LETTERS AND JOURNALS

What is the effect of reprinting an 'actual' letter or journal entry in a story, rather than simply conveying the gist of a letter or journal entry without reprinting it? Intimacy, for one, is a sensation that is evoked; not only does the reader perceive the intimacy between the writer and recipient (or discoverer) of such a document within the story, but she herself feels a greater intimacy with and connection to the contents of the story. Letters and journals are, of all the documents and pieces of paper that blow into and out of a human life--birth certificates, social security cards, homework assignments, bills, magazines, contracts, napkins, dollars and the like--the most redolent of flesh, blood, mind and heart. They are, both literally and figuratively speaking, coated in human fingerprints, in the residue of life. Life takes place in flickering moments and thoughts; it is these flickers--just a handful out of billions upon billions--that are set down and rendered indelible in letters and journals. That Salinger would pepper his Glass novellas with so many letters and journal entries is in keeping with his tendency to pull out these flickers of life and hold a textual magnifying glass to them. It is yet another quality that lends him his Romanticism. The use of letters and journals as storytelling devices arose out of the Romantic movement--of which such a huge facet is narratizing, poeticizing, stylizing and *Romanticizing* reality.¹ Letters and journals lend a palpable sense of realism to what is already a form (the novella) purported to chronicle true, real-life occurrences among people the narrator himself knows or has known.² (See chapter seven on

“Form(lessness) and Silence”.) In effect, they simultaneously enrich and *de-fictionalize* fiction.

Franny is certainly complexified by Salinger’s inclusion of a letter—penned by the title character—in its opening pages. Both the content and tone of the letter, as well as the aura of affection surrounding its recipient’s re-reading of it, are in stark contrast to the feeling that permeates forthcoming pages of the story. The recipient of the letter is Lane, Franny’s beau. Salinger is careful to note that Lane is carrying Franny’s letter in his pocket, that he is spontaneously compelled to re-read it while awaiting her arrival at a train station, and that the letter itself has a “handled, unfresh look, as if it [has] been read several times before.” These details attest to a genuine feeling for Franny on Lane’s part. Critics, however, tend to blow past these carefully rendered details, so eager are they to despise Lane for the qualities that emerge in him during his and Franny’s subsequent lunch at Sicklers: his pretentiousness, his self-satisfaction with his intellectual prowess, his consumption of frog’s legs and snails, his pleasure at being seen at the “right place with an unimpeachably right looking girl,” and his physical desire for Franny. He, typically, is labeled as a ‘phony,’ the worst of all Salingerian traits. The letter itself is peppered with effusive declarations of affection; Franny writes “I love you” some four times. Yet, during lunch, she conveys a decidedly different attitude toward Lane, far from love and closer to disgust—making her letter seem quite forced and insincere. In truth, Lane, while perhaps not altogether likeable—or, at least, lacking the larger-than-life Glass charisma—is just *himself*. Pretentious though he may be, he wears his rough edges with unapologetic bravado. Franny’s forced letter, so contradictory to her subsequent

behavior, demonstrates that she, unlike Lane, is not always *herself*. In fact, the discordance between her letter and her behavior imply that she is the phony one. Critics, however, are quick to sympathize with her incrementally-rendered breakdown during lunch, resultant, it seems, of her sensitivity to all things ‘phony,’ and she is labeled the genuine and fragile seeker. Such a facile reading and conclusions about the characters in *Franny* would not be made were more attention paid to the letter--and its reading--that open the story. Careful attention to these deliberately-placed aspects makes it much harder to villainize Lane and canonize Franny; they beseech us to be more careful in discerning just who is ‘phony’, and who is simply a human and himself, albeit a bit unlikable. The presence of the letter in *Franny* insures that things are not so cut-and-dry as they may seem.

Similarly, *Zooey*—the novella that concludes the conflicts introduced in *Franny*—opens with a letter. It, too, has “an over-all *unappetitlich* appearance” because it has “been taken out of its envelope and unfolded and refolded on too many private occasions during the four years” since its original sending. Salinger likes to make sure we understand that, in the Glasses’ world, letters are read and re-read. This attributes them a significance and air of sentimentality that we, as readers, are to respect and acknowledge. At the age of eighteen, I inadvertently left my wallet in the backseat of the car of a friend-of-a-friend. When I got it back, there was a small, foreign piece of paper tucked inside, on which was scrawled a letter--penned by the aforementioned acquaintance. This sparked a lively correspondence between myself and the friend-of-a-friend, who soon became simply a ‘friend’ and, later, ‘best friend.’ I still have that first, small, wallet-sized

letter, (though it was the mere seed, the genesis, of enough correspondence to fill shoeboxes, filing cabinets). It is still tucked into my wallet. It has grown soft and worn; the places where it was folded have turned into tears. It has the appearance of something that has been removed, unfolded, refolded and replaced many times. Its Salinger-esque qualities don't stop there, though. Each time I re-read it, I come upon these words: "I heard about your love of Salinger extending even to his writings buried somewhere in periodicals. Have you read *Hapworth 16, 1924*? I find it beautiful over and over."³

In the case of *Zooey*, the letter is written by Buddy Glass who, ostensibly, has also penned the novella itself. Salinger kills several birds with one stone in including this epistle. Firstly, he succeeds at establishing the intimacy between the narrator of the novella and its protagonist, Zooey, who is the recipient of the letter. Salinger also, through the mask of Buddy's self-deprecating comments on his letter, allows himself to comment self-consciously about his *own* prose. It is "virtually endless in length, over written, teaching, repetitious, opinionated, remonstrative, condescending, embarrassing—and filled, to a surfeit, with affection." These can all be said to be qualities of *Zooey* itself; Salinger gives himself a one-up on the critics, whom he doubtlessly anticipated would allege these 'flaws'-- by noting them explicitly in the guise of Buddy talking about his own letter. (See chapter on "Narrator/Author Ambiguity.") Thirdly, the letter, because it is a four-year-old remnant from the past, functions to bring the past *into* the present more immediately and tangibly than could be done were aspects of the past simply *told* by the narrator. Zooey, in the bathtub, is literally holding the flickers of four years ago in his hands. When Buddy, in the letter, beseeches Zooey to

“Act...with all your might” we know that, four years previous, Zooey was going through an episode similar to the one Franny is going through at present. He is, in reading it, equipping himself to wedge Franny out of her collapse. As well, the letter offers information about the upbringing (at the hands of Seymour and Buddy) of Franny and Zooey which has undoubtedly caused them to have conflicts with the acting profession—and all things seemingly artificial—in the first place. It refers to Seymour (even including one of his haiku-esque poems), and discusses Seymour’s death and its effects on his young siblings.

Finally, and primarily, the letter in *Zooey* acts as an introduction to the subsequent Glass novellas. *Zooey* is almost certainly the first of them to have been written.⁴ Therefore, it is appropriate that it have an introduction of sorts, something to draw readers into the web of the family, familiarize them with its history and dynamics, and enable them to better comprehend the novellas that would follow, (not to mention the other bits of writing-within-the-writing that show up in *Zooey*, namely: an abbreviated journal entry written by Seymour on a shirt cardboard, and the series of quotations with which Seymour and Buddy had painstakingly emblazoned the back of their bedroom door). Because it is written from one Glass to another, and, consequently, contains details about the family, its members and its history—in the form of memories—the twelve-page letter in *Zooey* makes an appropriately intimate and enveloping introduction to the forthcoming series of family romances.⁵

In *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Seymour: an Introduction*, Salinger uses letters and journals to add dimension to his already multifaceted stories. *Raise High*

the Roof Beam features two pieces of written communication from the rarely-seen Boo Boo Glass.⁶ The first is a letter beseeching Buddy to attend Seymour's wedding ("a day," Buddy writes, "God knows, not only of rampant signs and symbols but of wildly extensive communication via the written word"). The second piece of writing by Boo Boo, from which the novella takes its title, is a quote from a poem by Sappho she has written on the bathroom mirror of Seymour's apartment. "For years," Buddy explains, "among the seven children in our one-bathroom family, it was our perhaps cloying but serviceable custom to leave messages for one another on the medicine cabinet mirror, using a moist sliver of soap to write with." The inclusion of this rather homey detail, along with the actual written message itself, serves the same function as the "exact reproduction of the pages from Seymour's diary that [Buddy] read[s] while sitting on the edge of the bathtub," and the letter written by Seymour for Buddy that is 'reproduced' in *Seymour: an Introduction*; they increase the vitality of both the story and the characters therein. Characters who *write* things—and whose writings are reproduced as evidence of their aliveness, their thoughts, the flickering moments of their existence—are much more animate, more life-like, than characters who merely speak and act in accordance with what the narrator/author/puppeteer has written. Characters, like the Glasses, who *write* seem to have a life of their own, outside the "casino proper," as Salinger would say, of the fiction.

In adding epistolary elements to his fiction, Salinger, like the Romantics that preceded him, facilitates the illusion that it is *them*, the Glasses, talking and not *him*, the authorial man behind the curtain. In the places where he has included bits of writing by

the Glasses, he appears to be removing himself entirely and allowing their existence to speak for itself. This causes the reader to have a direct, unmediated connection with the characters; the barrier of the author that normally stands between a reader and fictional characters disappears. Consequently, the Glasses, and their stories, ring all the more true.

Notes

¹ See Eugene Stelzig's *The Romantic Subject in Autobiography: Rousseau and Goethe* for descriptive details about Romanticism in general.

² This comes from the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "novella."

³ *Hapworth 16, 1924* was Salinger's last-published work. It is an entirely epistolary novella, consisting of a letter penned by a seven-year-old Seymour Glass to his family while at summer camp. It has never been book-bound, but appeared in the *New Yorker* on 19 June, 1965.

⁴ I am in agreement with John Updike that the Franny of *Franny* does not become a Glass until she appears in *Zooey*. When *Franny* was initially published in the *New Yorker* in 1955, it was a story unto itself. Only when Salinger followed it with *Zooey* in 1957 did it become one of the Glass novellas. Technically, *Zooey* is the very first work that connects the Seymour of "Bananafish," the Franny of *Franny*, the Boo Boo of "Down at the Dinghy," *Zooey* and Buddy and establishes them as members of one family. It is the first time Salinger uses Buddy Glass as his alter ego/narrator. In subsequent novellas, it is Buddy who purportedly 'wrote' the aforementioned stories about his kin.

⁵ "Family Romances" is the title of an article about the Glass stories by David Lodge.

⁶ Boo Boo, as mentioned in the note above, appears in one of the *Nine Stories*, "Down at the Dinghy." This was written before Salinger had completely conceived the Glasses and included her among them.

CHAPTER 7

FORM(LESSNESS)

To read the Glass novellas in chronological order—that is, in the order in which they were published and, most likely, written—is to witness Salinger’s increasingly ecstatic retreat from the niceties of form. The stories are rife with detail, with interruptions in the form of letters, journal entries and telephone conversations. They are exceedingly jocular; single paragraphs span pages. Salinger’s text is like a finger glued to the ‘zoom’ button on a video camera; it is with great deliberation that he fills a page with a catalog of the contents of a medicine cabinet. It is with cheeky self-consciousness that he fills a story with more asides, footnotes, digressions, and seemingly irrelevant ramblings than with its supposed intended subject matter. Subjectivity, originality, emphasis on feeling, spirit and the individual, spontaneity, imagery: all of these are characteristics of Romantic literature. All are achieved, in the case of Salinger, by a break from the constraints of traditional, ‘good’ form.

‘Good’ form is inarguably one of the hallmarks of Salinger’s early, pre-Glass stories. As a burgeoning writer, he took the time to learn the fundamentals of effective story writing.¹ Both his uncollected stories and his *Nine Stories* indicate him to be a master craftsman. The prose is economical; characters and actions are vividly rendered without an abundance of words. Subtlety reigns. A reader feels sharp when confronted with these stories; the language is crystalline, pointed. Nothing is painstakingly explicated, yet everything is conveyed. A ‘conflict’ is introduced, a ‘climax’ occurs, and matters reach a ‘conclusion’ of some sort.² Taking this into account, it is plain to see that

the comparative formlessness of Salinger's later works—his Glass novellas—was conscious and deliberate. Salinger did not 'lose' his craftsmanship when he wrote the Glass novellas—though he often deprecated it through the guise of Buddy Glass when he was at his most freewheeling, formulaically speaking. Rather, he *redirected* his craftsmanship, and used it in different ways to achieve a decidedly Romantic effect of both hyper-reality and surreality combined.³

° I still have my first novella. At the age of fifteen, I was assigned several weeks worth of after-school detention for committing the Caulfield-esque crime of truancy. I had, in layman's terms, 'ditched' my more tedious high-school classes one too many times, and always in the company of my then-boyfriend, bad influence and 'first love.'³ To wile away the hours spent in detention, I undertook to compose a piece of writing about my adventures with said boyfriend, chronicling real-life events⁴, from the circumstances of our meeting to our present stay in coupledness. I decided that this piece of writing would be a novella, and called it as much, for it was longer than a story, but not so long as a novel. I took the voice of a third-person narrator, someone who knew both myself and my companion, and who had witnessed events as they transpired between us. Through this narrator, I recalled various true occurrences in staggering, photographic detail. Everything—the most fleeting facial expressions, mere tinges of emotion, a slow blinking of eyes, nuances of color, facets of the natural world, quality of breath—was rendered on page after page of flowery abundance. To this I added reproductions of actual letters, quotes from actual texts, lyrics from actual songs. It was as categorically novella-esque as could be (albeit, now, a bit tiresome to read); a

descriptive, cinematic chronicle of Romanticized, real events. At that tender age, I had not read any Romantics, who might have influenced my authorial undertaking, nor was I yet aware of the genre of Romanticism. I *had*, just months previous, read the Glass novellas.

Breathlessly long lists of mundane objects can seem extraneous when inserted into a work of fiction. Yet, without such lists, *Zooey* would lose much of its vitality. Beginning with the jangling, pocketed contents of Bessie Glass's "usual at-home vesture... a hoary midnight-blue Japanese kimono," Salinger presents a litany of workaday 'whatnots' in *Zooey*. There are the assorted toiletries, ointments, medicines, marbles, and a "somewhat torn snapshot"—all cited in detail—within the Glass family medicine cabinet. There is the cluttered and "sprawling miscellany" of the Glass family living room, also noted—lamps, phonographs, radios, books, furniture and all—with explicit, descriptive care. What happens when these everyday objects, these things that the eyes typically whiz past, these prosaic, even grossly human (as in the case of the "Fitch Dandruff Remover") remnants are wedged out of their anonymity and into the limelight? What is the effect when Salinger takes this *stuff of life*, the inconsequential objects that suffuse everyday existence, and lists them? That which was nothing becomes something. That which went unseen is seen. By deigning to not only grace them with language, but place them (purposefully, squarely, obtrusively) in a story, Salinger is endowing these objects with a grace, a life, and aura of significance they would not otherwise have. He beckons the reader to Look, to Notice, to See what Seymour calls the "current of poetry that runs through things, all things." It is the "all things" that clinches;

even the “strapless chassis of a girl’s or woman’s wristwatch” has inherent poetry. Once, a girl, a human, wore it. Their contact, their intimacy with human life is what lends these objects their poetry. Just as Seymour’s hands permanently bear marks from certain things he has touched, so do objects—the accessories of a household—bear the residue of the human lives in which they have figured.

The lists within *Zooey* serve a less sentimental purpose as well. They lend the novella its profound, cinematic visuality. This story—like Romantic works before it—appeals to the eyes more than any other faculty. Buddy introduces it as not “a short story at all but a sort of prose home movie,” and the careful citation of *things* can be read like a set designer’s notes. Salinger’s prose is akin to the eye of a camera panning slowly, slowly across a set.

Slowness, rather than speed, is a notable quality of *Zooey*, imparted by its unusual form. It is divided into four distinct chunks: the letter from Buddy read during Zooey’s ablutions; the bathroom conversation between Zooey and Bessie; the living room conversation between Zooey and Franny; and the concluding phone call from Zooey to Franny. The action is not physical but verbal; it takes place in the exchange of words, many words. And though the words pour out of the character’s mouths quickly, the action—that is, the movements and changes occurring within the story—transpires like drops of molasses.

Time seems to slow down similarly in *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*. This chronicle of the events of Seymour’s wedding day (“[It] was...by way of understatement—no ordinary day...”) consists mostly of conversation (through which

Salinger exhibits his deft ear for the nuances of mid-century American conversational speech, and the differences from one voice to the next). This conversation takes place in two big chunks of space and time: the first, in the back of a very cramped, chauffeured car; the second, in a small apartment. Space—here consistently portrayed as very limited—works in conjunction with Time; the former seems to slow down and stretch out the latter. Further enhancing the quality of slowness is the repeatedly mentioned oppressive heat of the day. People perspire; drops of moisture appear on faces, on the underside of itchy bandages, and the outside of glasses of Tom Collinse. Salinger manipulates the sense of time even more by interrupting the conversation that comprises the bulk of the story with two instances wherein Buddy, the narrator, retreats alone to read excerpts from Seymour's journal, which he has discovered. These journal entries bring the reader into the past; the 'present' of the story proper is temporarily forgotten. And even the 'present' of the story proper is not the 'present' at all, but the past, for Buddy has composed it as a recollection of events occurring some twenty years previous to the time of writing.

Seymour: an Introduction is a true form-and-time experiment. "Speed, here," Buddy writes, "God save my American hide, means nothing whatever to me." Ostensibly a memoir of Seymour penned by Buddy, it is mostly a present-tense running commentary on the state of the memoir itself, rather than a focused collection of memories of the deceased. Here, more than in any other Salinger work, form is blatantly, happily disregarded. "I'm an ecstatically happy man," Buddy says, to account for and explain his long-winded, formless prose. "I happen to know, possibly none better, that an ecstatically

happy writing person is often a totally draining type to have around. An ecstatically happy prose writer...can't be moderate or temperate or brief; he loses very nearly all of his short paragraphs." Confessions such as these—indicating Salinger's awareness that he is breaking all the 'rules' of 'good' story writing—abound in *Seymour*. He seems to say, "Yes, I know what I'm doing, and I'm doing it on purpose." Nothing better substantiates this than one of the story's introductory sentences: "It is (to describe it figuratively) as if an author were to make a slip of the pen, and as if this clerical error became conscious of being such."

Consciousness is the phrase that best captures the tone of *Seymour*. It appears to be stream-of-consciousness. Buddy's (Salinger's) subjective consciousness of the present, of himself and of the quality of his prose is expressed. It is *apparently* arbitrarily interrupted by his consciousness of the past (memories of Seymour). This 'messy' form, however, is not the result of careless, stream-of-consciousness writing. *Seymour* is, in fact, as much a careful commentary on the process of writing and on critical notions of what makes 'good' writing as it is a work of fiction. It captures Salinger at his most feverishly Romantic pitch. It uses a hopelessly self-conscious narrator to express (and mock) the trepidation that comes with breaking the so-called rules of writing. It uses formlessness to justify its own formlessness.

I believe I essentially remain what I've always been—a narrator, but one with extremely pressing personal needs. I want to introduce, I want to describe, I want to distribute mementos, amulets, I want to break out my wallet and pass around snapshots, I want to follow my nose. In this mood, I don't go anywhere near the short-story form. It eats up fat little undetached writers like me whole.

Perhaps no excerpt evinces Salinger's Romanticism better than the one above. He asserts he is a narrator—not a 'writer'—but one who narrates events, one who observes and relays, the ideal novella-ist. He has "extremely pressing personal needs," and therein lies the Romantic subjectivity (albeit the subjectivity of his stand-in, Buddy Glass) of his prose. He wants to "describe," to "pass around snapshots"; thus, the "prose home movies." He wants to "follow his nose," not worry about fitting stories—lives—into cookie-cutter constraints of form. Life does not fit into a form. Because the Romantic is most concerned with true life—the spontaneity, subjectivity, details, spaces, flickering and protracted moments that comprise it—he will not *write* it into one.

Notes

¹ In *In Search of J.D. Salinger*, Warren French describes a young Salinger's enrollment in a writing class at Columbia University, taught by then-editor of *Story* magazine, Whit Burnett.

² *Franny*—not a Glass story at the time it was written—is less novella-esque and more in keeping with these traditional ideas of story form than its followers.

³ In his article, "Almost the Voice of Silence: the Later Novelettes of J.D. Salinger," Ihab Hassan writes that the Glass novellas demonstrate a "new conception of form...[that is] essentially sur-real."

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary describes a novella as a depiction of real people and true events recounted by someone who knows firsthand.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: THE POINT OF SALINGER-AS-ROMANTIC

Salinger's creation of the Glasses and their world is a crystalline call for innocence—conscious innocence—to transcend the cynicism that comes with experience.

The Glass novellas comprise their own world—a world thoroughly and painstakingly rendered—with people, spaces, words and details so real it is hard to believe they are not of *our* world, but are pure fiction. Their world mirrors (a mirror is a *glass* via which we See) ours, but like all captivating fictional worlds, it contains the infusion of the author's own idealism, something of his heart, the message he would like to give to our 'real' world via the creation of his fictional one. Salinger's invented world is very much like ours—his rendering of the "irreproachably Americanese" mannerisms of speech, and of the everyday verities and accessories of life (such as the contents of a medicine cabinet) make it so. But the reason, the real reason, we are so eager to steep ourselves in Salinger's world is not its similarity to ours, but its difference. There is something different about it. It can be argued that we read for the very purpose of encountering difference, to meet what is 'other.' In Salinger's case, that difference is his Romanticism, which—when we temper all its trappings down to one succinct distillation, is innocence.

Innocence is the 'difference' because cynicism has been fashionable since at least forever. Romanticism and all its trappings, particularly when translated by Salinger—idealism, the virtues of being childlike, mysticism, cluttered apartments overseen by ex-vaudevillian moms who wear tattered old Japanese kimonos every

day—is not ‘fashionable.’ These things aren’t ‘cool’; nor were they in the 1950’s. Salinger has never been truly fashionable, especially not compared to his literary contemporaries, the Beats. The disaffection that resulted from their disillusionment was ‘cool.’ Salinger’s call to conquer disillusionment—the universal ache of the human heart, the discomfort and pain that are inherent to the very experience of being alive—is not to become disaffected; nor is it to affect a sort of transcendent joy or beatitude where one truly feels neither (as Franny Glass attempts with her Jesus Prayer, but is effectively dissuaded from such phoniness by her brother, Zooey). Instead, Salinger calls us to See, to see as a child, an innocent, sees. ‘See, See, See’ is the message of the Glass novellas, and at their heart is the Seer, Seymour, who calls us to see “the current of poetry that runs through things, all things,” and that everyone and everything everywhere is “the Fat Lady,” a manifestation of the divine, or, as Zooey says, “Christ Himself, Buddy, Christ Himself.” In Salinger’s world, the way to overcome disillusionment is to see—truly see—but with one’s feet still remaining firmly on the ground, steeped in the trappings of the everyday world, which he so cinematically renders. For when one sees so astutely, as Seymour does, but without keeping his feet firmly on the ground of the earth, he becomes “dazzled to death.” Consequently, Zooey encourages Franny to abandon her pretensions of prayerfulness and pursue the very earthly vocation of acting, for which she has a natural gift. To immerse herself in acting will be just as holy, if not more so, than saying the prayer, because it is an endeavor that will keep her tethered to the world, (just as Bessie Glasses continual attempt to bring Franny cups of chicken soup are a “holy act”).

Salinger is not categorically anything. He is not categorically religious; no church

would embrace his mystical, almost Gnostic spin on Jesus or his comments about the Christ's so-called followers. "Who else in the Bible besides him knew," Zooey says, "*knew* that we're carrying the Kingdom of Heaven around with us *inside*, where we're all too goddamn stupid...and unimaginative to look." He is not categorically 'beat' or 'hippie,' though his world contains some of the ideals of the former movement, and predicts a few of the latter. He is closer to the Romantics of the 18th and 19th centuries than anything else.

Interestingly, many of Salinger's most innocent notions are couched in an exceedingly cynical-sounding dialect, as whenever Zooey, it seems, opens his mouth (or, similarly, if we look outside the realm of the Glasses, Holden Caulfield). The tone of his world—the dialogue, setting, and every detail—is decidedly 20th century. In bringing 18th and 19th century ideas into a 20th century context, Salinger's message is that these ideas are valid and true, yesterday, today, tomorrow and always: the way to overcome the cynicism that comes with experience in the world is to adopt—not affect, but adopt—innocence. For who best and most effortlessly sees the "current of poetry" that runs through things than a veritable innocent, a child? Who but a child can most easily accept that a Fat Lady or an annoyingly pretentious college professor (Franny's Tupper) and everyone in between is truly a limb in the body of Christ? Salinger's name for his invented radio quiz show is not incidental; "It's a Wise Child," indeed, in his world.

And Salinger's best adults are the ones who retain child-like-ness, who think, for example, that touching loved ones will leave a permanent mark on the palm. His pen turns nothing short of poisonous when he portrays the so-called well-adjusted grown ups

(such as the cynical, egotistical Matron of Honor in *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*) who are rendered as far-removed from any and all “current[s] of poetry”—so ‘out of it’—so emotionally, intellectually and spiritually *retarded*—as to be dwarfed by any child, or any adult, but childlike, Glass. The Matron of Honor, naturally, detests the Glasses and all that they represent, and Salinger positions her, literally, opposite Buddy and, figuratively, opposite Seymour as representative of all that they are not.

Of course, the world is full of “Matrons of Honor”; it is full of cynics. Salinger’s message may be unfashionable, and downright ‘dorky,’ so to speak. But isn’t it vital? That everything is difficult is old news. Everything has always been difficult and will always be difficult. People will behave badly, suffer, and the world is a harsh place. The world is never great. Salinger blows right past what so many artists get hung up on: how everything is difficult, painful. For Salinger, that’s a given. The real crux of the matter is how, despite that, when one sees—truly sees in the manner of an innocent, for whom everything is new and marvel-worthy—there is an inextinguishable current of poetry in the world anyhow, and everyone is an expression of holiness besides. Experience is difficult; it can leave one “fresh out of God,”¹ so to speak, and full of cynicism. It most often, in fact, does. Salinger’s is a call to see the omnipresence of ‘God,’ to see that one can never really run out of ‘it’, as we are steeped in it, even as we are steeped in difficulty.

In noting the Romanticism of the Glass novellas, we are enacting a kind of distillation wherein more and more the essential message that lies at their center is re-emphasized. Salinger’s ‘childism,’ his mysticism, his invention of a narrator/persona who

mirrors himself, and whose narratives mirror/mimic reality, his invention of a cinematically rendered world, rife with the marks of invented characters, his playful attitude toward form, all add up and coalesce into one point: the point of innocence. This call for innocence over cynicism is labeled, tellingly, 'Romantic.' The very act of calling it 'Romantic' reveals the cynicism of the culture in which it exists, thereby throwing the difference between what Salinger's world calls for and what actually *is* into greater relief. It is in his Romanticism that Salinger's vital, life-affirming point is manifested.

Notes

¹ To borrow a phrase from the 21st century poet, Greg Keeler.

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