

## IN PLACE OF A HERO

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Young people today have no spokesmen. The day of the youth league and its ideology seems to be over. Today we have the club again, and the gang, and perhaps the family. It might even be wrong to say that the young have heroes—models of courage, skill, commitment or self-sacrifice. Bright middle-class teenagers often have a developed sensitivity to each other's problems, but are very unlikely to require heroic activity from their friends. Young people do sometimes have *successes*: short-run Horatio Algers of the entertainment industry, eighteen year old novelists, precocious females demure and impure. These are even sought out, by men who know the market. But among the young themselves, they are usually the objects of a very cynical admiration; they have "made it"—which is to say: they have been made.

Ideology, heroism, success: none of these seems sufficiently compelling. For the young today, the importance and excitement of the adult world have become somewhat problematic. On the one hand this can lead to that odd combination of indifference and professionalism which one sometimes encounters in college students. On the other hand, it produces an earnest confusion, less often critical than nostalgic, which contemplates without enthusiasm or alternatives its possible maturity.

Some sense of this confusion and of the painful sincerity that goes with it is necessary in order to understand the phenomenon of J. D. Salinger, the writer most admired and read by many young people today. In one sense, Salinger represents the indulgence of a mood; but he is also the confidant of those who indulge the mood. Affectionate and tender, he speaks to the adolescent soul with urgent but reassuring intimacy. Yet he is also full of advice. He understands the ways in which growing up is a misfortune, a process of compromise and surrender. Reconciliation, however, and not resistance is his eventual concern: he is whimsical, all right, but not absurd. His opening theme is childhood lost, his conclusion is a half-mystic, half-sentimental resignation—with an ultimate glimpse of childhood regained. Finally, he is successful, appealing and comforting because he suggests a kind of reconciliation with the adult world which is at the same time an evasion of worldliness.

It is in grateful recognition of this evasion that many young people have accepted Salinger's characters, Holden Caulfield as a brother and Seymour Glass as a private and sainted memory. Holden, it should be remembered, had his last fling at sixteen; Seymour committed suicide

at thirty-one. The two events have the very moderate virtues of aimlessness and failure—we don't after all want moral lessons—but in their retelling, Salinger slips into sentimentality, contrived whimsy and a cagey, esoteric piety. So the academic critics, committed as they are to the surface seriousness of things, call Holden a pilgrim, and undoubtedly one of them will shortly grasp the somber truth that Seymour is a martyr and a saint.

This portentousness is Salinger's own fault—perhaps his intention—and it surely misrepresents the young; it even misrepresents Holden and Seymour. For precocious piety and innocent goodness are not yet wisdom, resourcefulness, or moral conduct; they cannot motivate martyrdom or, by themselves, make pilgrimage significant. They are qualities which remain to be tested, to be embodied and sharpened by worldly encounter. Salinger, however, turns them into the standardized equipment of a cautious, wistful rebel. When the earnest and uncertain young men identify with Holden Caulfield, they are expressing a deeply felt discontent. But it is a discontent devoid of all appetite for adult satisfaction. It seems on the one hand to lack purpose and on the other hand to be free from all anxiety about purposelessness. It lacks, above all, just that moral irascibility which was once thought the truest sign of youth. This vague rebelliousness is Salinger's material—what he both truly expresses and badly exploits. He cultivates a sense for its style, and he adds to its gentle ineptitude an engaging piety, at once sentimental and exotic. He does not, of course, suggest any actual confrontation, between the discontented and the world of their discontent.

## II

Salinger's characters are not heroic in part because they are members of the family. They are members, almost, of a Victorian clan—the patriarch vague or missing, the clan more of a fraternal coterie—and it is familial feeling which provides the background for the affection, honesty, and love which he seeks to describe. The gang would not do, for the gang exists in the jungle, its energy is already worldly. Salinger's family is an alternative to worldliness, a place of dependence and protection, a safe foundation for fantasy. Out in the world, Holden is a delightful and an inventive liar; he resembles at moments the characters in some recent English comic novels. Like them, he has nothing to tell the truth about. But to his ten year old sister, he can explain—at length and with *sincerity*—how he really feels. Holden, that is, has someone to tell the truth to; in this sense, at least, Salinger may well be a prophet. The English have not yet advanced so far that they can recognize the family as a retreat.

But Holden explains himself also to us—the painful readers—and it is to us that Buddy Glass addresses his tense and emotional reminiscence. "If you really want to hear about it . . . What I mean . . . If you want to know the truth . . ." Salinger's artfulness is best revealed in his ability to reconstruct the circumstances and sentiments of teenage revelation: sit down a minute, I want to tell you everything.

He tirelessly reads us his family mail, prints fragments from the diaries of the dead Seymour, relates the unassorted jottings of his brothers and sisters. He gathers his stories through a presumably random (but he assures us, total) recall, and pays a public price for the remembering. He drags us into his living room for "home movies"—I think of Salinger as the only modern writer with a living room—and there we sit, silent members. He is insistently intimate, urgently garrulous, wordily familiar. For Salinger this familiarity has a moral (as well as a literary) motive, and that motive is affection. He seeks to draw us into the clan, to bind us by the somewhat tendentious (not to say, onesided) heatedness of his intimate, utterly candid communications. There is not a drop of cold blood in his veins.

Outside the family "people never believe you," as Holden says. He means adults and he is right enough; adults are suspicious, and children, if they have a native honesty, have also a native gullibility. Salinger is incapable even of suggesting the virtues of the wary, artful adult. In the past Americans discovered a kind of heroism in the tight-lipped, middle-aged man who combined reticence, competence and secret goodness. He was a "tough guy," and his toughness paid awkward tribute to experience; one was not born resourceful and independent. But today, Salinger seems to say, the only contrast to the innocence and fervor of the child is the affectation, the cruel conventionality, the phoniness of the adult world. The adult is not "real;" he lives amidst sham.

But not sham at all: that is what one would like, for it is at least the proper opposite of innocence and sincerity. If children are candid, then let adults be hypocrites and the war of generations rage. But neither Holden's complaint, nor that of Franny Glass, is about hypocrisy; they are not really concerned with the lie, nor with actual cruelty. It requires something like moral firmness to resent hypocrisy, and though Holden has, as do all of Salinger's children and, I would guess, many of his readers, a natural sense of the sweet and the good, Holden is no moralist. His true concern is with foible, affectation, minor pomposity, casual carelessness—all of which combine to make this a jungle of fallible (but not ferocious) animals. The jungle itself, however, is no part of Holden's experience. Nor of Franny's; and when her brother tells her that every fat woman is Jesus Christ (and hence not to be resented), it is a counsel of imperfection which bears little relationship to the real imperfections of the world. Love, he tells her, can transcend foible and fatness alike: *it certainly had better*.

So the professor who goes into the men's room to muss up his hair before class is after all no villain. Nor is the Ivy Leaguer in the theater lobby who "said the play *itself* was no masterpiece, but that the Lunts, of course, were absolute angels." With them, one can make emotional peace. But surely the hypocrite and the moralist have another difficulty, and a fairly simple one: they are permanently at odds, irreconcilable. This occurs to none of Salinger's characters, and for that reason I don't believe it is fair to say that they are simply unspoiled; I think they are untouched.

At the same time as the child approaches the adult world, he escapes into fantasy. Holden's fantasies are relatively modest, though they bear a close relationship to the religious aspirations of Salinger's later characters: Holden dreams of being a "catcher in the rye," the defender of children at play, or a gas station attendant in the west, deaf, dumb and solitary. Now these are obviously not alternatives to his inevitable fate; his older brother, a writer, is already "out in Hollywood . . . being a prostitute." Still, if fantasies were alternatives, they would not be fantasies. It would surely be foolish to wish that Holden dream instead of a better social order, or of revolutionary heroism. His own dreams are attractive enough: childlike, comfortless, intransigent. What is disturbing, however, is that his dreams do not lead him to any kind of adventure, not to anything at all but casual encounter and sensitive recoil. As Seymour's mother-in-law says, he doesn't relate. Salinger's characters can't like or even know anyone they don't love—*who isn't in the family, for chrissake*.

If this is really true, then why doesn't Holden set out for that gas station in the west? He might be a beat traveller. That, I suppose, is the real alternative and it is not especially interesting. Holden, instead, goes home to his ten year old sister; he doesn't want adventure, any more than do most of Salinger's readers; he wants affection. He will become an adult gently, carrying with him in the phoney world only a single moral image, the image of childlike simplicity.

One of Salinger's most enthusiastic critics, Arthur Mizener, with a revealing inability to imitate that simplicity, has suggested that the writer's search is for the Good American. I'm inclined to agree, despite the capital letters. The concept is worth examining. The Good American wears short pants, preferably; he's not too tough ("I'm a pacifist, if you want to know the truth"); he's a little precocious and entirely inexperienced and he goes under as soon as he encounters America. "I mean it's very hard to meditate and live a spiritual life in America." A rebel in a world he scarcely saw.

### III

Since Holden's last fling, Salinger has written almost entirely of the Glass family, a clan of seven precocious children, of Irish-Jewish stock and distinctly Buddhist tendencies. The main theme of these stories has been love. Love is the bond which holds the seven children together—and love, along with a touch of friendly condescension, is what binds them even to their parents. The family here is a mythical gang, truly fraternal, truly affectionate; it is as if, remembering Holden's loneliness, Salinger is determined never again to permit one of his characters to be alone.

The precocity of Salinger's children takes many forms: they learn foreign languages with amazing ease and write poetry in Japanese. But the most important form is an extraordinary religious and mystical insight. I think it fair to say that love for Salinger is either familial or Christlike; it is the love of brothers and sisters—or of brethren. The

last of these is obviously the more difficult, and Salinger sensibly recommends but does not describe it. He writes of erotic love not at all, and it is worth at least entertaining the idea—though it contradicts many of the operative assumptions of our culture—that his young readers are really not interested in it, that they are entirely satisfied with the love of Holden and his sister or of Zooey and Franny.

Marriage in Salinger's stories is a sorry affair; it takes place only after childlike love is finished or surrendered. Seymour marries in what seems to have been a burst of purely private ecstasy and mystic condescension. He needed, he thought, the "undiscriminating mind" of his wife; she would represent and embody his commitment to the ordinary. His wife Muriel married out of "a primordial urge to play house permanently." Seymour's suicide, in one sense at least, was an escape from a woman he had neglected to meet. Towards her Salinger is pitiless, even (or especially) when he is being kind, and yet, except for Sister, Muriel is his only woman. Poor thing, she has neither mystery nor wisdom; neither innocence nor whimsy. She is at home in the world, the phoney world, and therefore no part of Salinger's fervent household.

But reconciliation with the ordinary world there must be, else Salinger's affection would have curdled long before now, and his readers, who can have little taste for bitterness, moved on. Seymour's marriage was an apparently unsuccessful rehearsal for this reconciliation. But his suicide was less a confession of failure than a whimsical withdrawal from the commitment. His brothers and sisters continue the effort to invest the conventional world with a spiritual value they know to be peculiarly their own. If only they can believe it, the fat woman *is* Jesus Christ—though it is not, after all, necessary to marry her. Commitment can happily take less physical forms (and withdrawal less drastic ones); characteristically, these forms are occupational. Zooey Glass becomes a television actor; Buddy Glass, Salinger's favorite narrator and the writer of the family, teaches English at a small, upstate New York girls' college. His withdrawal is signified by his unelectrified, unwinterized cottage, on the other side of the mountain. At the very end of Salinger's last story, Buddy describes, in an amazingly pretentious paragraph, the true nature of reconciliation:

I have an impulse . . . to say something mildly caustic about the twenty-four young ladies, just back from big weekends at Cambridge or Hanover or New Haven, who will be waiting for me in Room 307, but I can't finish writing a description of Seymour . . . without being conscious of the good, the real. This is too grand to be said (so I'm just the man to say it), but I can't be my brother's brother for nothing, and I know—not always, but I *know*—there is no single thing I do that is more important than going into that awful Room 307. There isn't one girl in there, including the terrible Miss Zabel, who is not as much my sister as Boo-Boo or Franny. They may shine with the misinformation of the ages, but they shine. This thought manages to stun me: There's no place I'd really rather go right now than into Room 307. 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?

Yes, he is wrong. There is a great deal of ground that is not holy,

acres of it—if you will just look. What is most objectionable in the passage above is its terrible inclusiveness. I don't doubt that every good teacher, when he goes into Room 307, must—sometimes—feel something of what Salinger has described; but if he begins to imagine that every girl in class is his sister I can only suggest resistance. But Salinger is wholehearted; Room 307 undoubtedly represents the whole world; it must be indiscriminately "awful" and indiscriminately "holy." In a similar way, Buddy is terribly superior and infinitely condescending, and his embrace must be all the more total for the emotional distance from which it is undertaken.

Love at a distance, whimsical appreciation ("the terrible Miss Zabel"), manages to combine commitment and withdrawal; I would guess that it makes both marriage and suicide unnecessary. But what does it do to the quality of love? In Salinger's stories love, familial and Christlike together, is primarily the habit and the wisdom of precocious children. It is almost inevitably, given Salinger's style and his subject matter, a bit precious. It is also indiscriminate and uninvolved. "They don't seem able to love us," Teddy says of his parents, "unless they can keep changing us a little bit." He loves them, on the other hand, with no such demands. Preciousness is even more revealing. As a small boy, Buddy glows to tell us, Seymour refused to go to the barber-shop when he thought his neck was dirty, for fear of hurting the barber's feelings. Holden is a little bit in love with "old Jane" because when they play checkers she won't move her kings out of the back row.

Love is also made a matter of mystic feeling and insight, but of this I will offer no examples. Salinger has announced that he is holding oriental cards—in footnotes and occasional esoteric references he has specified, presumably for the learned, which cards those are—but he has not yet played his hand. Holding exotic cards is something like refusing to move one's kings from the back row. It's a testimony to one's unusual self, but it has little to do with other people.

#### IV

Whimsy and religion are Salinger's ploys. He does not mean them to indicate willfulness, that is too harsh, nor mere childishness, that is too unimportant; nor morality, that is too difficult, and not pure contemplation, that would be farfetched. He means them to indicate *superiority*. Whimsy is the caprice of the precocious; religion, their secret insight. For such people does Salinger write: gentle, unconventional people, who find themselves behaving exactly like everyone else, but who know that they are different, if only because they remember that once they were young. But is that really such a precious or exclusive memory? Perhaps it is, and perhaps that moment of uncertainty before a young man surrenders himself to higher education and total organization is as important as Salinger's prose suggests. But I doubt that the moment is adequately represented by whimsy, or that it can survive in reminiscence, or be resurrected in esoteric piety.

The numerous silent members of the Glass family, Salinger's ardent

readers, share a kind of emotional superiority, which, one must admit, has little that is worldly in it. They pursue their careers with a sense of grace, that is, with an assurance of style. They are reckless, but only in imagination; after all, they were rebels once. They are painfully sincere, which is to say, loquacious; and—their truest mark—they are whimsically discontented, that is, they complain only about unimportant things.

Membership in this fervent household, however, is for the good alone. And here I think Salinger and his admirers must be taken seriously. Goodness for many of us has always implied activity, vigor, commitment. Good men—let me put it strongly—are energizing centers of ethical action. This is simply not so for Salinger, and presumably it is not so for most of his readers. Goodness for them seems rather a matter of personal style and impulse; its quality is unpretentious, naive (indeed, willfully so), sincere, whimsical. It imitates the child because he presumably has these qualities naturally and indulges them freely; he represents the absence of convention and corruption. That is not, of course, because he is incorruptible. But what is for him a merely temporary condition can easily become a permanent posture. The posture is not entirely incompatible with world activity, but questions of ambition, work and conflict are evaded; the engaging precocity of the *wunderkind* makes them all seem irrelevant.

Salinger's idea of goodness is another version of disaffiliation, but it is the happiest version, and the easiest, because it makes disaffiliation a secret. Who, indeed, would guess that S. never moves his kings out of the back row? So far as society is concerned, the earnest, uncertain young man goes underground. But not to cultivate the resources of the rebel, not to test his capacity for silence or for patience. The underground is his irregular home, a unique realm of security and affection, sharply contrasted with the worlds of Hollywood, advertising, the organization. Up above, the young man may lie, it is a bit of whimsy; he may prove querulous, it is an indulgence; he may be a success, it doesn't matter; but he will not be active, involved, driving, lustful. He is the first among the disaffiliated to give up cult of experience, and therefore he is permanently untried. But for his readers, perhaps, that is Salinger's greatest appeal. I said above that he is seemingly incapable of cold-bloodedness; surely his readers understand this and appreciate it. Their lack of ambition is also an absence of taste for danger, even for the simple dangers of everyday human encounter. But what will their love come to, and what their goodness, if they do not calculate and take risks?