

II

THE SALINGER SYNDROME: Charity Against Whom?

by Robert O. Bowen

ROBERT O. BOWEN, novelist and critic, is best known for his World War II novel, *The Weight of the Cross*. Although a regular reviewer for *The National Review*, his fiction has appeared in official USSR journals. He is an Associate Editor of *RAMPARTS*, and is currently teaching at the University of Dallas.

WHEN A WELL-TO-DO COLLEGE STUDENT was gathered in recently for bank robbery, he confessed to understanding himself better for the experience, and several journalists praised his humble candor. J. D. Salinger's characters demonstrate the same caustic humility which slashes as sentimentalists those who attempt virtue while relieving the slob of any onus of failure: no strain, no pain, as the saying runs.

Cast in a jargon promulgated from the shoddier prep schools of the East, the Salinger philosophy parallels the sick-sick line transmitted by Mort Sahl and related cosmopolitan think people. A sneer at a physical defect here, a cutting remark at an ideal there, and the audience falls into line rather than risk a turn at the whipping post. From the first wild ballyhoo at the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* to Salinger's canonization through the presentation of his peaked visage on a *Time* magazine cover, his work has been relentlessly pushed by social science teachers, editors, and "Garment District" critics of the Lionel Trilling cut. Salinger, they staunchly agree, holds the mirror up to a degenerate American culture.

Almost all of Salinger can be found in one *New Yorker* magazine story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish": the superficial action, the social-notes-from-all-over diction, and the basic lack of profound inquiry. As for the people, not merely the hero or his wife lack purpose; rather the world of the story offers no hope, no aiming

point, not even a direction. The story provides a nostalgia for childhood as a defense against the insights of maturity as though the adult world were by nature evil and miserable. The authorities appealed to are ineffectual at best: the psychiatrist is a lush; the parents are fools; the army is cruel; the marriage bond is a lousy drag. In agreement with Salinger's other fiction, the dramatic statement is that true maturation lies in perceiving life as corrupt.

Sick or not, Salinger's fiction attracts many young people, a symptom which ought not be blinked. He militates against traditional strictures, and because they are rebellious, many youths develop a Salinger syndrome temporarily. Perhaps Salinger's strongest appeal—being that usually aped by students—is his aggressiveness against language taboos. Unlike Henry Miller, Salinger rarely violates the statute, but his tone and diction violate good taste as the following *Catcher in the Rye* samples indicate. "Poker up his ass," "she had very big knockers," "giving her a feel under the table," "flitty-looking Tattersall vests." Such gaucheries amuse as "twenty-three skiddoo" or "Oh you kid!" once did, but with the difference that the Salinger fan repeats them in mockery, often boasting that he is tearing down established standards. Grandfather's gaucheries differed in kind since they aimed at elevating the boy rather than reducing the surroundings.

Frequently Salinger appeals as a peepshow into forbidden areas. Holden Caulfield's wanderings in *Catcher in the Rye* include a hotel room sortie with a prostitute, a homosexual reconnaissance, casual descriptions and/or reference to perverse conduct. A significant appeal to an immature reader lies in both the subject matter and in the Freudian word games required in a search for Holden's motives.

ANOTHER SALINGER DEVICE for the reduction of constructive values is the misdirection of positive values in reader sympathy. Generally the evil which he openly attacks in a character is minor or absent, but the attack destroys the victim regardless, and with the victim goes some respect for his calling. Holden turns aside his old history teacher as a phony. The teacher has tried to help Holden, and, of course, Holden wished to justify his own worthlessness by implying that no one had offered assistance. So the teacher is negated as a phony, the grounds being his reference to Holden's parents as "grand people." The criterion for spotting phonies in the book is necessarily vague since no one, including the narrator, is presented as un-phony. The mechanism allows the reader to remain on the approved side only if he is not phony enough to be taken in by parents, teachers, and others who make constructive or pleasant remarks.

A large area of Salinger's appeal lies in the misconstrued pity his misery sharers draw. In "Just Before The War With The Eskimos" the heroine suddenly sympathizes with her snob schoolmate on learning that the snob's brother is an advanced slob and an invalid, that the only outsider in the house is a homosexual, and that the schoolmate herself is easily manipulated. Her aim is certainly to create an infantile subjective superiority. Again, the insight is that in the *real* world, inside the home, with the facade stripped and the brother picking his nose in his dirty pajamas—in this climate of truth we are all slobs. The viewpoint character's condescension is hardly Christian charity since she considers no help, no direction away from the present mess.

WHERE CONDESCENSION SERVES FOR PITY, the Salinger wit offers savagery as insight, coercing the reader into an attitude out of fear of being stuffy or what is worse, altruistic, reverent, nice. *Catcher in the Rye* subdues a reader summarily in the passages on "old Jesus," who was a "poor bastard," and the Disciples, who "annoy the hell out of" Holden because they did not help "old Jesus." If the reader sympathizes with the passage, the tone disallows him reverence. If he balks at the tone, he is as phony as the Disciples.

Should he call off-side against the Christians, no doubt he will be tagged an enemy of free speech.

Should a passage deviate to the serious, the tone bogs down at the material level rather than ponder any spiritual truth. In the short story "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" the narrator, that precocious Salinger young man, experiences a revelation while watching a girl lace a hernia truss on a dummy in a shop window. "The thought was forced on me that no matter how coolly or sensibly or gracefully I might one day learn to live my life, I would always at best be a visitor in a garden of enamel urinals and bedpans, with a sightless, wooden dummy-deity standing by in a marked-down rupture truss."

SALINGER EVIDENCES CONSIDERABLE SKILL in reducing the vision of an ideal through pejorative or disgusting details. The page numbers parenthesized after the following citations from the Signet edition demonstrate the regularity in *Catcher in the Rye* of such rhetoric. This is not merely a smart alecky kid's tone; the areas of attack indicate the grand design of the book in paralleling similar areas cited earlier and demonstrable throughout Salinger.

On Christianity: "I said I wasn't blaming Jesus or anything. It wasn't His fault that He didn't have any time" (p. 91). *On American Folk Heroes*: "They were always showing Columbus discovering America, having one helluva time getting old Ferdinand and Isabella to lend him the dough to buy ships with, and then the sailors mutinying on him and all. Nobody gave too much of a damn about old Columbus, but you always had a lot of candy and . . ." (p. 110). *On Christianity*: "I said old Jesus probably would've puked if He could see it" (p. 125). ". . . it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap" (p. 141). *On American History*: "'A Christmas Pageant For Americans.' It stinks, but I'm Benedict Arnold. I have practically the biggest part" (p. 146). *On Educational Institutions*: "They have this day, Veterans' Day, that all the jerks that graduated from Pencey around 1776 come back and walk all over the place, with their wives and grandchildren and everybody . . . One old guy . . .

wanted to see if his initials were still in one of the can doors . . . All you have to do to depress somebody is give them a lot of phony advice while you're looking for your initials in some can door" (p. 152).

The steady attrition of blasphemy alone in *Catcher in the Rye* conditions the reader to a blasphemous view of the world. Throughout all of his work Salinger's first person narrators punctuate with *Christ sake*, *Chrissake*, *Christ*, *Jesus*, *God damn it*, *goddam*, *I swear to God*, and varieties thereof. No one denies the practice of blasphemy among ill-bred people, but that observation does not explain how a reader can wallow in so much blasphemy and remain reverent toward either the Holy Name or anything else.

THE MOST NEGLECTED single factor in all of the current Salinger criticism is his anti-Catholicism. This critic does not know a single citation on the subject. Catholics have warped their vision safely around such controversies as the Mexican Suppression of the Clergy in the 1920's and the Christian nature of the Hungarian Rebellion of the 1950's against Communism, and it is not to be expected that they would shed their ghetto mentality for domestic anti-Catholic propaganda. The Salinger attack has been overlooked sufficiently that the Catholic magazine *America* recently joined with *Time* and the *Partisan Review* in praising his literary virtues.

The Catcher in the Rye is the most directly anti-Catholic of Salinger's works. On page 102 of the Signet edition his hero says "Catholics are always trying to find out if you're a Catholic." The comment concerns one Ackley, a most unsavory young beast, and a Catholic. The bias is readily enough noted if we stand the remark against the same sentence with a different noun: "Jews are always trying to find out if you're a Jew." Similar lines have drawn heavy fire from the Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish pressure groups. Surely, open-minded readers will acknowledge the propriety of measuring anti-Catholicism by the same scale. One page beyond the citation above, the speaker condescends to say: "I'm not saying I *blame* Catholics [for finding out whether others are Catholic]. I

don't. I'd be the same way, probably, if I was a Catholic." Seventeen pages beyond, the canard is repeated: "The Catholics stick together." The remarks are significant because neither Catholicism nor Catholics have any bearing on the narrative.

A more insidious negativism lies in Ackley's being a Catholic. Aside from his disgusting personal habits, his Catholic defense of the Church in arguments is this: "I don't care what you say about *me* or anything, but if you start making cracks about my goddam religion, for Chrissake—" Now, the New York City school system purged Dickens' *David Copperfield* because Fagan low-rated Jews, and purged Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* because the phrase "Nigger Jim" offended Negroes. What with such militant measures, New Yorkers well know that when only one of a kind occurs, the one is an editorial judgment on the kind.

Farther along in *Catcher in the Rye* Salinger likens two nuns to Salvation Army beggars around Times Square. The nuns are not very bright, and they pass quickly with many condescending remarks. Apparently the passage proves Salinger's objectivity toward Catholics: he is kind to nuns! However, in his bourgeois tone to liken them to Salvation Army beggars around Times Square makes them seem stupid in the light of the fact that nothing altruistic is worth attempting in such a phony world as his.

The implied slur for the Salvation Army in Salinger's use of it as the ultimate in his condescension formula speaks for itself. Interestingly such slurs are always toward minorities without effective falange defense. Thus when a Negro maid appears, as in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," she is good and even slightly abused, and she had better be, for the NAACP represents her. On the other hand, the Japanese couple in "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" are of that stupidly subhuman image found in the early *Mr. Moto* movies, but as with the Catholic Ackley, this couple has no action group to defend it in novels.

By contrast in "Down At The Dinghy" we find a little boy crying over something that a gentile—fortunately not a Negro—maid said

about his father.

"Sandra—told Mrs. Snell—that Daddy's a big—sloppy—kike."

Just perceptibly, Boo Boo flinched . . .

The reader flinches too, but who flinched at the familiar contempt for The Holy Name throughout Salinger? The point is offered that Salinger hardly deserves Christian praise for an essentially anti-Christian writing simply because that writing is pro-Jewish and pro-Negro and so on.

Probably Salinger is not basically any more anti-Christian than he is basically antagonistic to any undefended group, say hydrocephalics or basket cases. Still, in *Catcher in the Rye* as elsewhere, his victims regularly belong to unmilitant minorities or disorganized social elements. The headmaster's daughter bites her nails to the quick; the old history teacher is a nose-picker; Ackley, the Catholic, picks pimples on other people's beds; Stradlater, the handsome Ivy League type, uses a filthy razor; and on through the nauseous world.

Usually instead of being ethnically partisan, Salinger holds to bourgeois manners as taught in prep schools. He trails a victim until he catches him picking his nose; then he hollers "Shame!" and lights out after the next victim. Nose-picking falls under manners rather than the more profound value judgments of philosophy; and the foibles of Salinger's characters are specified by the advertisers of the magazines which publish his fiction: halitosis, dermatitis, and similar cosmetic derelictions. Ironically Salinger has borrowed a value system, superficial as it is, from the merchandising field of consumer consumption goods his un-heroes so passionately despise.

A CAUTIOUS READER may ask whether Salinger is being accused of the snobberies his characters demonstrate but which he intended with fully conscious irony as snobberies. If the stories and the one thin novel offered alternatives, this might be the case. If Holden, for instance, said that cheap luggage was a contemptible thing, and then Salinger paraded an admirable person with cheap luggage, the irony would be evident. In *Catcher in the Rye*, Ackley has cheap luggage.

Another bad guy has cheap luggage. The nuns have cheap luggage. In each case the persons involved are inferior, and their inferiority is reported partly in terms of luggage. Furthermore, luggage snobbery carries over into other stories, into "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" and "Teddy" for example.

No critic has yet pointed out the heavy vein of caste snobbery in Salinger. In *Catcher in the Rye* the three working girls from Seattle are sneered at because they lack Powers Model or Vassar poise. Here indeed is a turnabout since O. Henry's Mazie was pitied for her naiveté, while her cosmopolitan tormentor was despised for his cynicism. Salinger's elevator operator is looked down on as old and a failure, and two cab drivers react to Holden's importunities in exactly the same stupidly unsympathetic fashion. The sum of this is that cab drivers are surly and stupid people and office girls from Seattle are gawking and contemptible natives. Teachers, if not old nose-pickers in shoddy bathrobes, are homosexuals as with Mr. Antolini. All in all, the Salinger tone echoes with remarkable precision the essential meanness of the notorious 19th century English expression: "The natives begin at Calais."

A professional underdogism often incongruously accompanies Salinger's snobberies while being itself a relatively obvious hypocrisy. Throughout *Catcher in the Rye* Holden worries about girls being "given" what he coyly terms "sexual intercourse." Oddly Holden frets over virginity and in an unconvincing scene attacks his roommate Stradlater for "giving the time" to a mutual acquaintance. In a book so consciously wrought in the Freudian image, the reader is compelled to take Holden's rationalization as self-delusion. Holden is afraid of sex rather than fearful for virginity. His motive in not pursuing his relation with the prostitute was certainly not her virginity, nor as he tells us himself, his own virtue by way of his pity for her.

In the hotel room where this passage occurs, he is preoccupied with the "perverts" in other rooms, and at one point he gapes from his window to another wing to see "whether the perverts were still in action." Even a non-Freudian reader might well ask whether this concern

doesn't cast some doubt on Holden's virility. Later the book does so.

THE SALINGER COSMOS is the commuter world of John Cheever in which the wife-mothers sleep around the country club and the husband-fathers shrug off the shame because the liquor is good at home. In Salinger's "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" two suburban women, who had both once married war-time enlisted men, get brutally drunk together. One does bumps and grinds at the other, certifying a subdued Lesbian motif. Meanwhile, the hostess's little girl is ignored cruelly. The big message here is readable in block letters. We are to feel for this human flotsam because in a culture as vile as current American culture, they had no better end. Their Lesbianism and drunkenness and cruelty and stupidity and snobbery are not their fault; nothing is their fault. The fault is with the culture which provides no better choice.

Catcher in the Rye offers a similar relativist vision. Even an interest in certain music requires the reader to assume highly partisan sympathies. A song sung by a white, we are told, would be "corny," but sung by a Negro is "right." The Negro chauvinism seems an effort to be liked for circulating the right gossip as at the high school fraternity, and a very real pathos lies in observing just how many militant minorities Salinger has tried to appease in his writing.

Moving on to the famous Salinger style, his defenders claim him great in the colloquial tradition of Twain and Hemingway. For years his "For Esmé With Love and Squalor" has been promoted as a great short story, especially refined as to the precision and subtlety of its prose. Holden Caulfield's dreary diction we might blame on old Pency's failure to teach him the American language, but not so with Esmé's sensitive soldier friend. The narrator is an experienced and worldly writer, which is to say that if he uses a number of clichés, it is a failure on his part. Following is the delicate opening paragraph of "For Esmé With Love and Squalor," that gem of *New Yorker* virtuosity. The only original touch in the paragraph is in "breath-takingly levelheaded girl," a phrase which if serious is dis-

tracting since the wife has no place in the story worth mention, and if sarcastic has a precious flavor.

Just recently, by air mail, I received an invitation to a wedding that will take place in England on April 18th. It happens to be a wedding I'd give a lot to be able to get to, and when the invitation first arrived, I thought it might just be possible for me to make the trip abroad, expenses be hanged. However, I've since discussed the matter rather extensively with my wife, a breathtakingly levelheaded girl, and we've decided against it—for one thing, I'd completely forgotten that my mother-in-law is looking forward to spending the last two weeks in April with us. I really don't get to see Mother Grencher terribly often, and she's not getting any younger. She's fifty-eight. (As she'd be the first to admit.)

Have I overlooked a subtle mother-in-law joke? But what has a mother-in-law to do with the opening of this grim tale? Neither Salinger nor his mentors at the *New Yorker* have ever been very strong on the Classical Unities or other niceties of rhetoric as "For Esmé With Love and Squalor" will testify. Not a page beyond the above confusion, we find this recondite narrator saying, "I generally sat in a dry place and read a book, often just an axe length away from a ping-pong table." Salinger's literary daddy, Mark Twain, might have told him that only a Salinger cosmopolitan would have included an axe in a figure of speech; and worse, Salinger doesn't know that the measure is not an *axe* but rather an *axe handle*. A man who hangs out as far downtown as Salinger might not pay much mind to these matters, but those of us who try to match the words to the things remain fussy. Salinger is no stylist in the sense that Flaubert was through precision, nor that Mark Twain was through consistency of diction, nor even that Hemingway was, though he most resembles the latter in his restricted vision.

REPUTATIONS HAVE BEEN WON on studies of Salinger symbolism, especially on such as "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," the story of the suppressed Lesbians, and on such macabre

pieces as "The Laughing Man," wherein a crude, lower-class, young man tells some children stories which are obvious confabulations of his own sex life. In these stories the symbolism is the sexual parlor game symbolism taught in sophomore psychology courses all over America. In fact, the standardization of the symbols undoubtedly explains the current popularity of the stories among college youths.

In "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" one of the drunk women does bumps and grinds at the other. In the same story the little girl has an imaginary boyfriend who has a sword, which is partly why she likes him. She wears thick myopic glasses and peers at the women, symbolically trying to see what they are about. At the conclusion the mother places the glasses lens down, thus endangering their surface, a symbolic effort to preclude accurate vision on the little girl's part. About the only symbology paraphernalia lacking are the pointing fingers Walt Kelly's *Pogo* comic strip utilizes.

"The Laughing Man" is more shocking in that the story deals with a young man who monitors a group of children in a New York park. The Laughing Man stories are told his charges by the young man. During the narrative the young man breaks off with his girl because of an unknown offense. His serial stories deal with a monster whose head has symbolic significance so pointedly sexual as to be almost obscene, and the symbolism must be read as Freudian in light of the sexual innuendo paralleling the narratives in the speaker's relation with his girl.

AS ONE MIGHT HAVE ASSUMED about a world touching sex for its own sake, normal sex will pall and interest will consequently veer toward the unique, that is the aberrant. So the horrors of "The Laughing Man." So, too, what after Nabokov we might call The Lolita Syndrome in Salinger's story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Here a highly neurotic young man, Seymour Glass, plays on the beach with a six-year-old girl. The girl is "wearing a canary-yellow two-piece bathing suit, one piece of which she would not actually be needing for another nine or ten years." The subtlety turns on

the *need* nine or ten years from now for the halter of the suit when the girl's breasts will have developed. The innuendo introduces a set of budding adolescent breasts on this six-year-old in the reader's mind. Without being altogether facetious, we might style her a Maidenform Bra archetype. Similar kittenish sex reference is very common in Salinger and suggests that sex is the base beyond which he does not go. In the story under discussion, a few pages later, Seymour Glass casually and innocently—if innocence exists in a Freudian universe—disturbs the girl by kissing her foot.

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish" offers another Salinger gimmick worth comment: the deftly manipulated conclusion. Seymour Glass gets the sulks, stares at his sleeping wife, and shoots himself through the brains. Until the close of the last sentence, suspense hangs on whether he will shoot himself or the wife. The reader is so keyed to the physical question that he must neglect the spiritual or even psychological aspects of the suicide.

As a rule Salinger's narratives in moments of conscious introspection pivot on a superficial point of manners. In "For Esmé With Love and Squalor," the hero, supposedly a morose and learned soldier approaching combat, smiles at a little girl he meets in a tea house. His turn of mind adds little profundity to the story. "I smiled back, much less radiantly, keeping my upper lip down over a coal-black G. I. temporary filling showing between two of my front teeth." Salinger *aficionados* have commented that his people all have the profound self-conscious insights of fine artists, but in practice the characters' minds eject trivia like the above. Even in the climactic scene in *Catcher in the Rye*, when Mr. Antolini comes a-creeping with coarse intent, Holden's comical term "perverty" distracts the reader from the implications of coping with an avuncular faggot.

In Salinger's world only physical things in their most mundane sensory nature are discussed or offered up for silent meditation. By definition such a system is logical positivist and is limited to passions. Neither prime causes, universal moral law, nor other concepts of abstract principle are available to the logical positivist. Naturally, then, Salinger reverts to the tribal totems of the *New*

Yorker advertisers and Manhattan provincials. He has no other where to turn.

EVEN AS A LOGICAL POSITIVIST, though, Salinger is inconsistent. His cast of characters suffers a steady attrition through suicide. If valid extra-personal values are denied, a character need feel no qualms about anything. Why weep? In truth, why smile? A man could simply ignore as utterly inconsequential the phony utterances of square teachers and related duds, but suicide he would not because death would lack point. Still Salinger wants a deep anti-Existential sympathy for his little league Existentialists although ambiguously he will not acknowledge the value system upon which sympathy is predicated, for such an acknowledgment would require responsibility, which Salinger denies.

Salinger's failure as a philosopher or moralist comes through worst in his skirting the central moral dilemma posed by *Catcher in the Rye*, for evidently the author did not realize the significance of the climactic scene of his novel. The reference is to Mr. Antolini's pass at Holden and the bearing of this scene on the rest of the narrative. In Holden's wanderings, everyone he met was a slob. Only one character, Mr. Antolini, has shown the milk of human kindness. This man is truly concerned for Holden, not merely as a sexual target but as a human being. In simple, Mr. Antolini is the only one in the book capable of constructive, virtuous action. Mr. Antolini does have a social flaw, though: he is homosexual.

The dramatic complication Mr. Antolini raises must be distinctively resolved in order for the book to depict the character development which defines a novel. Holden had been kicked out of school and was afraid to go home. Mr. Antolini took him in, and during the night Holden awoke to find Mr. Antolini stroking his head in the dark. Any doubt of Mr. Antolini's intention is checked by the man's vague, embarrassed refrain: "You're a strange boy," hardly the comment of nocturnal innocence.

HOWEVER HOLDEN RESOLVES THE COMPLICATION, his action will express the judgment of the novel itself since this complication has

clewed up the major cords of the narrative. As noted above, Mr. Antolini is a last resort. He is virtuous in being kind, loyal, hospitable, and affectionate; and if good should be nurtured, surely his charity should be done so, for there is little enough of it in the world of this novel. He also is the only youth counselor the book offers above the level of farce. Holden's reaction must reflect judgment on these issues. Furthermore, if he has reached any maturity at all, he will understand the issues and act consciously about them. He need not be sophisticated, but he must be cognizant.

A glance at a moral problem in the purported model for *Catcher in the Rye* will demonstrate the distinction intended here as to consciousness but not necessarily sophistication. In *Huckleberry Finn*, the hero is ashamed to help a poor old widow's property escape, namely his companion Jim, a slave seeking his free family in Yankeeland. Huck accepts that if he helps Jim, he'll never be able to hold his head up to a white person again and that he will go to Hell. He does decide to help Jim, though. His judgment is unsophisticated but extremely moral. He saw the issues clearly. Jim was kind, loyal, brave, loving, and so on; and Huck helped him because of these virtues, despite his social faults. No matter what partisan feeling caste demanded, Huck knew his basis for judgment though he did not have a name for that. The modern *Huckleberry Finn*, as Holden Caulfield is known, hardly offers such a moral solution to Mr. Antolini's stealthy approach.

What can Holden do? He can beat Mr. Antolini's brains out as an argument for his own virtue. The action would be definite and would set Holden as a cruel person, a selfish person, possibly a perverse person. Or he could allow Mr. Antolini to have his way, thus encouraging his corruption. Or he could take the mature and morally rich position of remaining in the apartment so as to encourage Mr. Antolini's real virtues while protecting him from the weakness of perversion. The need for the last alternative is great because Mr. Antolini is apparently the *only* adult of any known virtue at all and so should be helped lest virtue fail entirely for lack of seed. Thus Holden's choice is of paramount impor-

tance to the dramatic statement of the book at large.

As a matter of fact, Holden does not elect any of the alternatives offered here. Instead he grabs his shoes and with a flourish of his casual wit lights out downtown. Holden dodged the issue. More to the point, nothing in the passage or elsewhere indicates that Salinger himself perceived the moral nature of the problem. Salinger didn't dodge the issue; he just didn't know it had passed by.

AT THE HEART of any Salinger narrative, whether about Holden's lost weekend or a day in Connecticut or lately about Franny and Zooey in the little book by that name, the temper is self-pity, moperiness with intent to creep. Franny describes her world thus: "It's everybody, I mean. Everything everybody does is so—I don't know—not wrong, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and—sadmaking. And the worst part is, if you go bohemian or something like that, you're conforming just as much as everybody else, only in a different way." This is indeed the logical positivist dilemma: a world in which one is unable to judge and so unable to move, to do anything at all to any meaningful end. Fundamentally in such a world only the subjective is true, which requires dramatically that all stories be quite personal and comparatively meaningless outside personal feelings, which themselves cannot have significance to another personality.

A considerable tactical advantage of Salinger's first person narrator is that the author need not be responsible directly for the opinions of his character, as we have noted earlier. Nevertheless, the author is responsible for the sum of his character's actions and opinions. At one point in *Catcher in the Rye* Holden says, "You take somebody that cries their goddam eyes out over phony stuff in the movies, and nine times out of ten they're mean bastards at heart . . ." Demanding but a wee trifle of consistency from this youth, we shall find this statement a judgment on his phony daydream about protecting little kids at play in the rye field. In fact, Holden is the most maudlin of self-sorrowful sentimentalists.

Furthermore, a brief contrast of Holden's judgments suggests that he is not merely a sentimentalist but that he is irrationally demanding in his sentimentality. On page 12 of the Signet edition he passes the insight that "People never notice anything." On page 18 he confesses that "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." From there he takes his head and runs in circles for some pages, until on page 81 he fetches up to another judgment: "People are always ruining things for you." Would it make these remarks any the more consistent to wrap a context about them?

THE INCONSISTENCIES of *Catcher in the Rye* recur in all of Salinger. The story "For Esmé With Love and Squalor" cites the following cryptic notation from the flyleaf of the book, left by a Nazi woman: "Dear God, life is hell." The Salinger hero, a sensitive and sophisticated soldier-writer, broods over the line because it reflects his current emotional turmoil. Neither he nor Salinger can see meaning anywhere except in personal contacts, and that between confused and slightly aberrant individuals. Painfully enough, in the story the two people who reach out to each other do so like two victims being flushed down a drain. There is no purpose in their contact; no motive is available to either. They struggle on for no reason and to no end. In their world is neither hope nor faith, and their Hell is merely a lack of creature comforts. Oh, the story has some mental exercises appended, the solving of a symbol or two, but these are merely "worked" rather than read to any revelation of spiritual or even psychological truth.

Salinger's nearest brush with profundity is a quotation cited by the homosexual teacher in *Catcher in the Rye* from a psychoanalyst. "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." In the Caulfield-Antolini context the speech signifies the failure of sacrifice, or trying, of faith ultimately. Taken as offered, as the sole truth, the statement casts an inference across the patronizing tone toward Jesus earlier; and outside of Salinger, from our long and ancient literary past it

undercuts our vision of heroes and their motives from Beowulf and Roland to the nobility of those Welsh Guards who in our own time lay behind at Dunkirk to stall the German armour and save a British army. Like so much of Salinger, the citation turns all values upside down. The martyr is a fool; the coward a hero.

AGGRESSIVE ATTACKS of this sort against our culture have been made by many with Salinger as ammunition. Other propagandists include Nabokov, inventor of the nymphette in *Lolita*; Tennessee Williams, notorious for the queer passions of his drama figures; Henry Miller, the Paris-Big Sur sex-monger; and a legion of others. Such partisan views are held with sufficient vehemence not to be ignored. However, the fervor of the opposition should not mislead us from the statistical conclusion that neither Salinger nor his cohorts have drawn a picture of the average or typical twentieth century American youth. Even taking into account students corrupted by Freudian psychology teachers and beatnik humanities lecturers, the Holden Caulfield type is relatively rare and remains a grotesque, an aberrant.

When our culture was more consciously Christian, aberrants were considered wrong; in mediæval carvings artists pointedly depicted grotesques as evil monsters. In Salinger we find the gro-

tesque not designed to hold our pity because it is a poor soul lost to order, to virtue, but rather designed for our admiration *because it is grotesque*. We do not see Holden across the chasm, lost from our humanity; instead he is offered as a model which our youth is asked to ape.

Quite clearly Salinger draws a picture of evil, and his apologists use that picture as propaganda in an effort to draw us into evil.

Far from being a kind and gentle and mature and objective and above all wise book, *The Catcher in the Rye*, like all of Salinger's fiction, is catty and snide and bigotted in the most thorough sense. It is crassly caste-conscious as the treatment of cabbies and elevator operators witnesses; it is religiously bigotted as the treatment of Catholics and the Salvation Army witnesses; it is caste-conscious as the Negro chauvinism witnesses; it is vehemently anti-Army and even anti-American in equating the American military with the Nazi military. All of these things are the reasons for the book's success, for its success lies in its utility as propaganda.

Let those of us who are Christian and who love life lay this book aside as the weapon of an enemy, and let those who wish it so read it. But let us be honest in this and charge bigotry where it stands. Feeding spite is no charity simply because the spite is against the faith and hope of a Christian vision of life.

III

SALINGER: The Murky Mirror

by Edward M. Keating

EDWARD M. KEATING is the Editor-in-Chief of RAMPARTS.

SOME TIME AGO a young friend of mine said, with some agitation, that "Salinger exposes the *decadence* of our society." He almost rose from his chair. This statement came rather as a shock, since I had read Salinger casually several years before, and had come to the conclusion that here was a young author of some modest talent whose only work would slowly disappear once its novelty had worn off. My friend's agitation, because of its obvious sincerity, prompted me to re-evaluate Salinger's work to see if there was more to it than I had previously imagined.

In the course of setting about this inquiry, I discovered a number of disconcerting obstacles, obstacles of such proportion that under other circumstances I would have dropped the whole thing and pursued less strenuous exercise. However, it was clear that Salinger and his work were enormously fashionable and, in a certain segment of the literary world, almost completely dominated the scene. If this dominance were a good thing, it should be encouraged; if bad, it should be resisted.

The single most serious obstacle to rational inquiry is the emotional controversy over Salinger and his work. The two camps (there seem to be no others) spend most of their time glowering at each other, and very little time in genuine evaluation. If someone wanders into this melee, he is suspected by everyone until he makes his selection of camps, at which moment he is both damned and praised.

Another difficulty in approaching Salinger's work is that, unless you look carefully, you may pass it by. Those familiar with the slimness of Salinger's work don't appreciate this difficulty, but the stranger, hearing all the fuss, is really

startled to discover that Salinger has published only one short novel (159 pages in the Signet edition) and approximately a dozen short stories. This is not a plea for bulk, but it does prompt one to hesitate before saying too much about so little. Besides, it is a bit hard on writers like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Greene, who have written great bodies of work, to be in serious competition for the public's favor with a skinny little thing that occupies so little of the literary shelf.

And then there is Salinger himself. Not so long ago, two national magazines, scenting something special, decided to do features on him and had to come out with bits of hearsay, pictures of distant houses and trees, and old family snapshots. Salinger has withdrawn. I am not trying to pry into Salinger's private life, but the result of his withdrawal has been to create a mystique, an intriguing wonder at what's really going on in that block cell, day after day. It is the allure of the mysterious. Beside the matter of mystique, there is the practical one of being able to converse with an author on his work. I realize this may cut against the grain with the "new" critics, but common sense tells us that if we can't find an answer to a problem, we should go to the one who posed it.

Then there is the final difficulty. For some time the word has been out about some future summary statement by Salinger, where he will synthesize, clarify, and summarize not only the entire Glass menage, but everything else that is significant. Some voices, almost tremulous, cryptically whisper the word *Summa*. Who in his right mind would want to proceed to a final statement of his own, knowing that sometime, somewhere, he will be confronted by the author's clear