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A Bouquet of Empty Brackets: Author-Function and The Search for J. D. Salinger

At the beginning of "Seymour: An Introduction," in J. D. Salinger's last published book, writer/narrator Buddy Glass offers his hypothetical "general reader" a gift:

. . . please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early blooming parentheses: (((O))). 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. (114)

This bouquet of empty brackets is a telling gift from a writer who would soon disappear completely from the literary scene, leaving millions of bewildered readers with more questions than four empty brackets suggest. The search for J. D. Salinger, the New Hampshire recluse and native exile whom Harvey Swados once called "the Greta Garbo of American letters" (119), became something of a minor national obsession in the early 1960s. From 1961 to 1962 *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Post Magazine* all conducted major "investigative" searches into the author's personal and public life. A reading public who had avidly consumed Salinger's three published books were extremely eager to "find" the author, and Salinger's refusal to give interviews, in fact to speak at all "outside the casino proper," as he called it, "of my fiction,"¹ only helped to stir this curiosity. Ever since, Salinger has continued to live in seclusion behind a high fence, refusing to publish, to answer mail, or to respond in any way to his numerous admirers.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the multiple consequences of Salinger's "disappearance" and of our sometimes obsessive desire to locate him. To begin with, I will look at the one extended biographical attempt to find Salinger, Ian Hamilton's *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. While Hamilton sets out on a detective-like hunt, what his book ultimately uncovers is not the mysterious author but rather the impossibility of ever accurately locating Salinger. Rather than biography, I will suggest, Hamilton's work is best seen as anti-biography which subverts the efficacy of the whole genre and opens a void similar to the ones opened by Barthes and Foucault in their discussions of the disappearance of the Author. It is into this void that the second half of this paper will venture, leaving Hamilton's Salinger-the-man in favor, as it were, of Foucault's Salinger-the-function. Rather than attempting to locate or define the man, I will here examine the way that Salinger's characters and name have been cut loose from his person and re-created in a number of fictional and non-fictional contexts. While Salinger may have disappeared, his name and his creations remain potent rhetorical entities that have resurfaced in a number of surprising places.

In order to examine Hamilton's anti-biography, we need to begin with a definition of the genre itself. There seems to be a fairly strong consensus among biographers past and present as to the essential goal of their work. This objective, as Jeffrey Meyers puts it in his introduction to *The Craft of Literary Biography*, is to "present a convincing and meaningful pattern in the author's life" (2). Ira Nadel echoes this opinion in his recent "Biography and Theory": "What does the biographical narrative provide? Primarily coherence: the telling of the life should have a sustained voice which should maintain a constant tone, pattern of tropes and what Mieke Bal calls 'focalization'" (13). Leon Edel, in his Keynote Address at a conference on "New Directions in Biography," repeats the same idea in a slightly different register when he suggests that "Every life takes its own form and a biographer must find the ideal and unique literary form that will express it" (10). In other words, what unifies and makes "the life" comprehensible is what the biographer does to it—the form of the story he or she chooses to tell.²

It is clear that Ian Hamilton believes in the possibility and the necessity of finding unifying patterns. His very title, *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, suggests the possibility that some unified subject can be found.

In fact, from the first pages he begins positing unifying categories: "It seemed to me that his books had one essential element in common: Their author was anxious, some would say overanxious, to be loved" (4). Hamilton's biography traces the biographer's task in trying to find these patterns, and does present a number of unified "Salingers," as we shall see in the course of this essay. However, I would suggest that the overall pattern which unifies Hamilton's text is not of Salinger's search for love, or Salinger's search for anything else for that matter. The "unique literary form" (to use Edel's words) in which Salinger's life is expressed, is the form of the *unsuccessful* search. What finally "unifies" Hamilton's tale is Salinger's elusiveness, his refusal to be found.

Ira Nadel notes another common feature of biography, besides its goal of focalization:

Increasingly biography since the nineteenth century foregrounds the voice of its subject rather than the biographer; or rather, the biographer, in seeking anonymity in order to sustain the objectivity prized by biographers, wishes to remove himself from the text and allow his subject, or his subject's actions, to speak for themselves. (13)

This kind of objectivity, of course, is rather deceptive. While biographers may try to create the illusion of objectivity by suppressing their voices, they remain, as Nadel notes, "the source, authority, organizer, analyst, commentator, and stylist of the life" (11). In reality, it is impossible to completely obscure those traces of the biographer's voice from the narrative but, as Nadel notes, this is not always a detriment to those biographers who strive for narrative unity. In fact, the biographer's presence in the narrative may be another way of sustaining narrative coherence by "allow[ing] the reader to feel that there exists a voice other than the subject's to provide guidance and direction. There must also be periodic remarks of a synchronic nature to establish both authority for, and trust in, the narrative voice" (13). Hamilton's *In Search of J. D. Salinger* does not conform to this synchronicity. The biographer foregrounds his own voice, while the subject remains lurking in the subtextual shadows. However, rather than providing a stabilizing influence on the text, Hamilton's voice destabilizes the narrative. Where Nadel suggests that the biographer's voice should provide guidance, authority, and trust, Hamilton's voice tends to subvert its own narrative.

He leaves the reader not with a feeling of Salinger's presence, but with doubts about the possibility of ever finding Salinger and, therefore, about the whole practice of biography itself.

While most biographers pride themselves on objectivity, Hamilton's work is unashamedly subjective. He defines his project as a personalized kind of biography: "The book I had in mind would . . . be a biography, yes, but it would also be a semispoof in which the biographer would play the leading, sometimes comic, role" (4). While the author imagines himself in a comic role, perhaps tragi-comic would be a better description. If the biographer-hero is a clownish figure, he is also one who truly believes he is on an important mission. Hamilton has much at stake in this "semispoof," not only in finding the subject but also, I believe, in finding the kind of subject he wants Salinger to be. Not only is the biographer unabashedly subjective, he also seems openly infatuated with his subject:

To state my own credentials: I remember that for many months after reading *The Catcher* at age seventeen, I went around being Holden Caulfield. I carried his book everywhere with me as a kind of talisman. It seemed funnier, more touching, and more *right* about the way things were than anything else I'd ever read. . . . *The Catcher* was the book that taught me what I ought already to have known: that literature can speak *for* you, not just to you. (5)

Hamilton states his credentials—not as an academic, poet, or biographer of some renown, as he is, but as a reader who was *changed* by Salinger's work. His credentials are not those of an objective reader, but of a subjective admirer. What kind of biographer will such a person make? In this first chapter the mask of objectivity is clearly removed, and by doing this Hamilton raises some interesting questions. Are not all of us in the same position as Hamilton's subjective biographer? Do we not all have something at stake, be it professional or emotional, whenever we read or study an author or a work? Do we not all read something of ourselves into the works we study? By highlighting *his* subjectivity, the biographer makes us aware of our own. This, in turn, begs the question of what an "objective" reading of Salinger could possibly look like.

Hamilton further complicates the search for Salinger in the construction of his biographizing hero as a split personality. The narrator

continually refers to himself as "we." One half is the "good biographer," the cool-headed, objective, morally decent professional; the other is the "bad biographer," the morally suspect gumshoe detective, eager to "dig up the dirt" on his suspiciously elusive subject. This narrative device exposes some of the conflicts any biographer must go through, and these conflicts expose the unscientific, fictional aspects of the practice of biography. The good biographer decides that since this is an unauthorized biography which Salinger is clearly opposed to, the decent thing to do is to set some ground rules: "Since up to 1965 [Salinger] had been in the public domain, but thereafter had elected not to be, I would not pursue my researches beyond that date. I would also undertake not to bother his family and friends" (9). There is something very peculiar about this, as Bruce Bawer points out in his review of Hamilton's book:

These rules strike one as odd: considering that the very act of writing such a book represents, to Salinger's way of thinking, an intolerable intrusion, Hamilton's supposedly principled decision[s] . . . [are] baffling. . . . If he's so reluctant to disturb people, for heaven's sake, then why write about Salinger at all? (94)

What Bawer ignores is Hamilton's self-consciousness to such questions, as expressed in the construction of the "alter ego." The good biographer/bad biographer split goes to the heart of an essential question about biography in general. Is biography a valid method of critical inquiry (good biographer) or is it simply voyeurism (bad biographer)? "At what point does decent curiosity become indecent?" the good biographer asks the bad (9). Hamilton's repetition of this question forces us to ask the same. Moreover, these questions tend to further destabilize the objectivity of the narrative, and hence subvert the possibility of ever really "knowing" Salinger.

Hamilton creates the same kind of destabilizing effect when he interrogates his own biographical methods and presumptions. The author consciously acknowledges that biography is, to some extent, a kind of fiction. As he traces Salinger's early days at the Valley Forge Military Academy, Hamilton quite consciously constructs Salinger as a Holden Caulfield prototype:

. . . there was some interest in seeing young Salinger foreshadowing young Caulfield. Or was it that this was what we wanted to find? We wanted there to be, from the start, some near-intolerable strain between the "anxious to be loved" side of Salinger and the other, darker side, the need to be untouchably superior. (33)

Not only is there a tendency to shape the facts to fit some preconceived pattern, there is also, Hamilton acknowledges, "a tendency always to inflate *any* contact [Salinger] might have had with the outer, public chaos of his time" (80). We see this sort of inflation in the description of Salinger's "contact" with the Second World War. Hamilton attempts to build a full chapter out of Salinger's war record and "war writing." Given that there is no real war record, that Salinger has never made any public pronouncement on the war, and that the few recollections of Salinger's wartime associates amount to little, Hamilton has no choice but to inflate. He does this by reading Salinger's "war stories" as records of his feelings about or experiences in the war. Since Salinger has only written four "war stories," and in fact has chosen to publish in book form only one of those, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," Hamilton is on very shaky ground. And this is not the only instance; much of his biography is built on rather obvious inflations. What is interesting is that where many biographers would tend to obscure their habits of inflation, Hamilton is at least (at times) up front about his.

The author is not the only one who constructs his subject to fit his purposes. When Salinger's past acquaintances remember him, what they remember is not only the individual they knew in the past but also who that individual has become *as an author*. This later entity is what Michel Foucault would call the J. D. Salinger "author-function." As Foucault notes in his essay "What is an Author?": "the link between a proper name and the individual being named and the link between an author's name and that which it names are not isomorphous and do not function in the same way . . ." (122). Hamilton acknowledges this same fact (somewhat more clearly) in his contact with people remembering Salinger:

More than once as we read through our letters from "girls" like Frances Thierolf or Roberta Byron, we had to remind ourselves that these were now women in late middle age. The Jerry they remembered had, even for them, a touch of hindsight, a touch of "J. D. Salinger." (50)

An obvious example of this "hindsight" which colors recollection comes in the account of the above-mentioned Frances (or Franny) Tierolf (whose married name is Glassmoyer). While she does not claim "the slightest resemblance to Franny Glass," she does say that Salinger had promised to write a book about her. She also has the following to say of Salinger as she "remembers" him from Ursinus College in 1938:

Most of the girls were mad about him at once—including me—and the boys held him slightly in awe with a trace of envy thrown in. . . . When we knew Jerry, he *was* Holden Caulfield, although when *The Catcher in the Rye* burst upon the literary world, he expressed surprise when I recognized him as Holden. (45)

Based on this kind of account, it seems that an objective reading of J. D. Salinger is virtually impossible. It is obvious that the author's name has become tightly entwined not only with his works, but also with a whole network of accounts, assumptions, stories and beliefs from which the name can never be completely disentangled. As Hamilton's destabilizing voice problematizes the pursuit of biographical objectivity and coherence, it raises some of the same theoretical issues addressed in Foucault's "What is an Author?" concerning the way the author-discourse functions. These will be examined shortly.

However, before moving on, I should add that the problems Hamilton raises are not all abstractly theoretical—some are in fact Salinger-specific. Many problems arise from Salinger's intentional hiding and obscuring of the facts of his life:

American intellectuals look with compassion on those Eastern bloc writers who have been silenced by the state, but here, in their own culture, a greatly loved author had elected to silence himself. He had freedom of speech but what he had ended up wanting more than anything else, it seemed, was the freedom to be silent. And the power to silence—to silence anyone who wanted to find out why he had stopped speaking. (8)

Because of Salinger's self-imposed silence there is very little material from which Hamilton can work. There are practically no interviews, no personal statements, almost no record at all of his "daily life" beyond his personal letters. And on the use of these letters (held by various libraries and institutions) Salinger sued Hamilton and won. Hamilton's biography

went from an original version with substantial but (Hamilton believed) "fair" use of the letters, to a second version with approximately 300 of Salinger's own words (both these books were entitled *J. D. Salinger: A Writing Life*), to the "legal" version, *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, which has no direct quotations and very little paraphrasing from Salinger's letters. Hamilton's book is of necessity a piecemeal work about a "patchwork apparition" (52). This becomes increasingly true the further into the "story" Hamilton gets, and the more reclusive Salinger becomes.

No life is more forbidding than a life that has been tamed, or set in order, or that is running to a hidden plan. And when, as in the case of J. D. Salinger, the inner life becomes virtually indistinguishable from any life that we might sensibly call "outer," then even the most intrepid chronicler knows himself to be facing an impasse. When Salinger embraced Eastern religion he was not just in retreat from a corrupt America; he was also imposing on his biographical pursuers a troublesome narrative longueur. (133)

Still, this doesn't stop Hamilton from making stories (witness Salinger's "retreat from a corrupt America"); it just makes the process a little harder. In fact, what becomes clear here is that all is story—though some stories are more convincing, and some harder to come by, than others. If we return to the original question of biographical unity, what finally unifies Hamilton's narrative is not any particular Salinger story, but Salinger's ability to escape the confines of any one story. Hamilton's failure to convincingly locate the author is the only unified ground on which the narrative rests. Salinger's ability to continually elude detection brings us back to Foucault who writes that "If we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence . . ." (117). Of what we see of J. D. Salinger in Hamilton's biography, perhaps most interesting are the openings, the gaps into which he "endlessly disappears."³

Barthes proclaimed the death of the Author, and trying to read Salinger's life the way Hamilton does gives us a pragmatic example of one author's disappearance. In "What is an Author?" Foucault sets out to take the Author's death a step further:

It is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared; God and man died a common death. Rather, we should reexamine the empty space left by the author's disappearance; we should

attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the fluid functions released by this disappearance. (121)

Foucault begins by asking how an author's name functions. With the help of John Searle, he points out that an author's name (as with any proper name) "oscillate[s] between the poles of description and designation" (121). In other words, the "name" has both denotative and connotative values. Thus, the name J. D. Salinger belongs not only to the actual person we could point to (if we were in Cornish, New Hampshire and could get close enough), but also to a vast network of discourse attendant on what this person wrote and published; what he may have written and not published; what he may or may not have done for the past 75 years; and, perhaps most importantly (and this is where the author's name differs from many other proper names), what other people have said and written about "J. D. Salinger." Foucault goes on to redefine the author's name as the much larger "author-function" which includes the network of discourse described above. The author-function, he explains:

. . . results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a "realistic" dimension as we speak of an individual's "profundity" or "creative" power, his intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. (127)

In other words, we construct "J. D. Salinger" in our reconstructions of his texts. This, as I suggested earlier, is what any biography does; Hamilton's biography is just a little more forthcoming about the process. Nevertheless, though Hamilton occasionally subverts his own constructions, it must be emphasized that they are the essential foundation of the text. Next, I would like to briefly survey some of these Salinger constructions as they appear in Hamilton's biography, which together form the Salinger-author-function. Then I will take a closer look at one of these constructions, the "sensitive outsider," perhaps the most pervasive figure, not only in Hamilton but in all Salinger criticism and "talk."

If Hamilton does not provide a single, unified Salinger for our consideration, he does provide a host of minor Salingers with varying degrees of familiarity and credibility. Not surprisingly, most of Hamilton's constructions are based on readings of Salinger through his characters. Hence, one of the first Salingers encountered is Salinger-as-Holden-as-youthful-rebel. Hamilton's consideration of Salinger's years at the Valley Forge Military Academy is padded considerably with remembrances from fellow students of the young Jerome. These invariably follow a standard line:

Both of us hated the military regime. . . . His conversation was frequently laced with sarcasm about others and the silly routines we had to obey and follow at school. . . . He liked people, but he couldn't stand stuffed shirts. . . . He always stuck out like a sore thumb in a long line of cadets. (23)

Hamilton goes to some pains to align the young Jerome with the young Holden through a questionable reconstruction of Salinger's attitude, and an equally suspicious reading of possible year book writings by the young Salinger. However, to give Hamilton his due, the portrait is not quite this simple. Salinger (and Holden) are not simply nonconformists, as Hamilton explains: "There is in him [Holden], as there is said to have been in Salinger, a rather touching willingness to please, to keep the peace, to tell people what they want to hear" (28). So the youthful Salinger/Holden is refigured in the conflict between wanting to fit in and needing to expose the hypocrisy of such conformity. This is an old story for Holden, and for Hamilton.

Another familiar Salinger persona shows up often in Hamilton's account—this is Salinger-as-Raymond Ford-(and later as D. B. Caulfield, and Seymour or Buddy Glass)-as-literary-saint. Ford, the protagonist of *The Inverted Forest*,⁴ is a 1930s poet of spectacular success and daring genius ("This man is Coleridge and Blake and Rilke all in one, and more," the story notes). Ford is the first in what Hamilton labels Salinger's "steady procession of dead, magically gifted artists," each of whom (at least in Hamilton's reading) seems divinely preordained as a great and usually misunderstood artist (103). Though this seems a fairly accurate, if typical, reading of some of Salinger's writers, Hamilton labors questionably to get this reading to fit Salinger himself. He attempts to draw the connection through comments made by Salinger's friends or

associates: "[Salinger] had complete confidence in his destiny as a writer—a writer he was and a writer he would always be—and what's more an *important* writer," says Hemingway biographer A. E. Hotcher (101). Hamilton also tries to show Salinger, in his constant bickering and battles with the "slicks" in which his stories were originally published, as someone who felt himself too good for this kind of commercial literary destiny.⁵ But again we must ask: Do these comments inform us about Salinger, or about who Hamilton, Hotcher, and no doubt countless other romantically inclined readers want Salinger to be?

The problem with all of these readings is that they are ultimately based on intention. They all suggest that Salinger possesses some certain characteristic, or combination of characteristics, which he then writes into his characters. These readings also suggest that it is possible to know Salinger *as a person* in the same way that we can know one of his characters *as a subject*. This project, as Hamilton's "split" biographer has shown us by trying to divine Salinger's characteristics, produces questionable results. What the biographer and reader are really doing, following Foucault's argument, is reading their own reading habits. We construct Salinger as a "projection . . . of our way of handling texts." If this is so, then "the nonconformist" and "the literary saint" tell us as much (or more) about Hamilton's ways of handling texts as they do about Salinger himself. Nonetheless, if we cannot definitively know Salinger, we can certainly learn much about what Foucault would call the Salinger author-function by investigating the history of the author's reception. In the next section, then, I would like to follow Foucault's lead and trace one set of "gaps and fault lines" that has come about from the disappearance, in several senses, of J. D. Salinger.

If we cannot know Salinger, we can know how Salinger has been handled, both by critics and by the much broader culture that has formed him. Because of the author's enormous popularity, his name has become an important counter of cultural exchange, and we notice several instances where his name has been dislocated from the context of his own works and applied in other discourses to interesting effect. Here we can witness, for example, the J. D. Salinger who is redeemed back into the world in W. P. Kinsella's bestseller *Shoeless Joe*, or the J. D. Salinger who *might* be read under the disguise of Don DeLillo's reclusive writer in *Mao II*. In 1995 alone, the enigmatic author "appeared" (in name at

least) on two popular TV sitcoms, *Mad About You* and *The Single Guy*. Each of these stories has something to do with the Salinger-function, though clearly J. D. Salinger is not an intentional agent in these dramas; his name has left his own hands. The most dramatic and troubling cases of Salinger appropriation have occurred in the real-life stories of assassins Mark Chapman, John Hinckley, and Robert John Bardo each of whom carried a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* during their assassination attempts and later referred to it extensively when discussing their motivation (Jones 242-43). Once again, Salinger's name is disengaged from his own discourse and reimagined in significant ways. I want to suggest that while each of these "stories" moves further away from Salinger-the-person, it simultaneously moves closer to Salinger-the-function, a set of discourses that have impacted greatly on our society over the last few decades.

In order to arrive at the troubling case of Mark Chapman, I would like to follow one avenue of the Salinger function, examining a story that has been told repeatedly about his characters (and often about himself). Since the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, one of the main stories told about Salinger and his characters is that they represented and indeed spoke for the voice of the disaffected, sensitive youth. Hamilton summarizes:

The Catcher Cult Catches On was a typical mid-fifties headline. The so-called teenage revolution had begun in 1954, and by 1956 adolescent outsiderism was thoroughly established as a market force: Films like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* scored huge popular successes. . . . Editorialists spoke darkly of a "youthquake." On university campuses Salinger's five-year-old novel had suddenly become the book all brooding adolescents had to buy, the indispensable manual from which cool styles of disaffection could be borrowed. *The Catcher in the Rye* was middle class and it gave voice to the malaise of the advantaged; it offered a college-boy version of Marlon Brando's leather jacket—a pacific, internalized manner of rebellion. . . . (155)

Although Hamilton is certainly not the first to suggest this, I think he is essentially correct in characterizing Holden's as a safe, middle-class rebellion.⁶ Holden's chauffeured odyssey, from an expensive prep school to a private Californian clinic, stopping along the way at nightclubs, hotels, theatres, museums, skating rinks, and his own family's distinctly

upper-middle-class apartment, may be one of an outsider—but this is clearly a privileged outsider. Holden's preference for ducks and children over phony adults may appear a lot less radical to us now than it did to some in the 1950s. Nonetheless, Holden was embraced by a certain, predominantly male (though not necessarily all adolescent), part of the culture as a character who spoke both to and for their feelings of disaffection. A college student at the time, Christopher Parker, reveals his peers' biases in an essay appropriately entitled "Why the Hell *Not* Smash All the Windows?":

I knew at least ten Holden Caulfields at ITT. . . . I think Caulfield's issue is a very real one—strong—and lets every boy who reads *The Catcher* think he's just like Holden and I think that's one of the reasons for its great success; we can all identify ourselves with his plight. . . . It's also sort of a fad among us to be very critical of everything and everyone, and those who are most critical are the strongest and most independent. . . . (Grunwald 254)

Holden's wasn't the only "rebellious" voice readers found in Salinger. In his next published work, Salinger's Franny Glass continued "the battle." Franny, it has been argued, exemplifies exactly the same type of middle-class rebellion; hers is a rebellion one can work on while finishing a college degree. Her attack on "section men" and Ivy League pretensions has been read as a continuation of Holden's anatomy of the hypocrisy of those in charge. In a review on the publication of *Franny and Zooey*, Leslie Fiedler in the *Partisan Review* writes:

Salinger of course speaks for the cleanest, politest, best-dressed, best-fed and best-read among the disaffected . . . [his characters'] *angst* is improbably cued by such questions as: "Does my date for the Harvard weekend *really* understand what poetry is?" or "Is it possible that my English instructor hates literature after all?" (Qtd. in Hamilton 183)

My intention is not to agree or disagree with these assessments of Salinger's work, but to suggest that the identification of the sensitive outsider (Holden and Franny are only two of several who have been discussed in this way) was an important part of the work's reception. If this identification is indeed one of the reasons for Salinger's undeniable commercial success, it may not be surprising that not only adolescents

and college students, but also those people employed to instruct these students, found value and interest in this sort of reading. If students found heroes and role models in characters who "challenged the system," while essentially remaining in safe complicity with that system, what better heroes were there for their instructors to embrace? By the late 1950s and early 1960s, *The Catcher in the Rye* was appearing with remarkable frequency on introductory English courses. Between 1951 and 1956, only three articles, apart from book reviews, appeared on Salinger. Between 1956 and 1960, more than 70 articles on *Catcher* alone appeared in British and American magazines (Hamilton 156). Many of these articles presented what would have been a familiar, though now more fully articulated, picture of the sensitive outsider. Hence, throughout the 1950s and 1960s we find essays and book chapters in which Holden is variously described as "The Misfit Hero" (Paul Levine), the "Alien in the Rye" (Albert Fowler), the "Good Bad Boy" (Leslie Fiedler), "The Responsive Outsider" or "rebel-victim" (Ihab Hassan), and the "Absurd Hero" (David Galloway).

It is clear, then, that not only adolescents were finding the voice of the sensitive outsider in Salinger's work. The first substantial critical article (as opposed to review) was Heisermann and Miller's "J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff" which, as two recent reception histories of Salinger's work suggest, "set the tone for much of the criticism of the next ten years" (Salzman 8).⁷ Heisermann and Miller see Holden as part of a long continuum of familiar heroes: "American literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies traditions in order to arrive at some pristine knowledge, some personal integrity" (32). As with outcast heroes of the past, Holden, in the course of his journey, exposes the "lust, hypocrisy, conceit and fear—all the attributes which Holden sees in society and which Huck Finn saw on the banks of the Mississippi and Dedalus saw in Dublin" (34). Where his younger readership valorized Holden by making him into a cultural icon, a James Dean or Marlon Brando in a red hunting cap, his more "sophisticated" readers valorized him in essentially the same way—by associating him with their iconic literary heroes. "He is Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom rolled into one crazy kid," write Heisermann and Miller (33). "Some Crazy Cliff" is the first of over 20 articles to compare the sensitive rebellions of Holden Caulfield and Huck Finn (Sublette 254). Charles Kaplan provides a

similar reading in "Holden and Huck: The Odysseys of Youth," which concludes:

In addition to being comic masterpieces and superb portrayals of perplexed, sensitive adolescence, these two novels thus deal obliquely and poetically with a major theme in American life, past and present—the right of the nonconformist to assert his nonconformity, even to the point of being "handled with a chain." (43)

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, articles compared Holden to everyone from Huck Finn to Jesus Christ. Articles such as Ihab Hassan's "J. D. Salinger: Rare Quixotic Gesture," and Jonathan Baumbach's "The Saint as Young Man: A Reappraisal of *The Catcher in the Rye*," did not so much reappraise the novel as extend the myth of Holden, envisioning him as a kind of secular saint. For many critics, valorizing Holden provided a neat package of both self-promotion and self-justification. On the promotional side, these articles were apparently quite salable—everyone wanted to read about Holden; why not give the people what they wanted? And what better method of promotion for these young academics than to find brilliance exactly where their students wanted them to find it? At the same time, these articles were self-justifying. They were elevating a rebellion in complicity that was probably not far from home for the rebellious young academics of the 1960s, who were no doubt young readers of *Catcher* in the 1950s, and who needed to justify their own complicity in a "phony" educational system that Holden, Franny and Seymour held in such contempt.

This portrait of Holden, Franny, and later Seymour and Buddy, as simultaneously vulnerable outsider and incisive critic, eminently fashionable in their rejection of fashions, was not without criticism. In an article critical of both Salinger and his readers, Alfred Kazin ends with an interesting and, dare I say, prophetic comment:

Salinger's vast public, I am convinced, is based not merely on the vast number of young people who recognize their emotional problems in his fiction and their frustrated rebellions in the sophisticated language he manipulates so skillfully. It is based even more on the vast numbers who have been released by our society to think of themselves as endlessly sensitive, spiritually alone, gifted, and whose suffering lies in the narrowing of their consciousness to themselves, in the withdrawal of their

curiosity from society, which they think they understand all too well, the drying up of their hope, their trust and their wonder in the great world itself. (52)

A dramatic fulfilment of Kazin's warning was to come 20 years after this comment. In December of 1980 an "endlessly sensitive, spiritually alone" Salinger reader provided a new interpretation of the sensitive outsider and *The Catcher in the Rye* with resonances which are still felt to this day. We can see in the most startling way the expanded boundaries of the author-function when we consider what happened when Mark David Chapman, armed with a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* inscribed "This is my statement," shot and killed John Lennon on the steps of the Dakota apartments in Manhattan.

It seems clear that Mark Chapman read Holden in a similar, if greatly exaggerated and obsessive, way to his earlier readers in the 1950s and 1960s. Once again, Holden was seen as the saintly outsider, the sensitive young man whose insights (in the words of Peter Shaw) "into adult world's hypocrisies . . . derived precisely from his being its casualty" (97). Like Holden, Mark Chapman believed himself to be a casualty of his own acute sensitivity. In the first week after the slaying he told his lawyer, Jonathan Marks: "My main problem is all my life I've been too sensitive" (Gaines 65). Later, he reported to journalist Jack Jones, who conducted over 200 hours of interviews with the killer in Attica prison, that "I'm not ashamed of all this, seeing all the evil in the world. I was always thinking about the bad in the world, because I was too sensitive" (76). However, Chapman's familiar belief that Holden spoke both to him and for him was carried to obsessive extremes:

I started reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, and I couldn't put it down until I got to the end. And I read it again. Then I held it between my hands. I put it against my face, and I inhaled deeply, drinking in the aroma. . . . And I felt: "Here is a way that I can identify with." A way to live an honest life, an unphony way of life. . . . [*Catcher*] represented a much more meaningful experience, a much more heartfelt anchor. . . . As the extent of my *Catcher* obsession grew, I became projected onto the pages as Holden Caulfield. I actually became Holden Caulfield in my own mind, as a way of coping. So that book became for me an imaginary anchor in the midst of a real cyclone. (Jones 175-76)

While millions of readers have identified with Holden, Chapman's identification is far more extreme in that it becomes unqualified and unconditioned by the fictional context. Unlike most readings, Chapman's refuses to mediate between the fictional and the real. From extensive interviews, depositions, and letters, it seems clear that Chapman drew a psychotic, dangerous line of interpretation: Holden Caulfield is a sensitive outsider; I am a sensitive outsider; therefore, I am (or should be)⁸ Holden Caulfield. Months prior to the assassination of Lennon, Chapman told his wife, Gloria, that he planned to change his name to Holden Caulfield (Jones 191), and actually wrote to the office of the attorney general of Hawaii (where he was then living) inquiring about name changes (Martin 40). He bought two extra copies of the novel—giving one to his wife (which he inscribed "To Gloria from Holden Caulfield") and keeping a spare for himself (which he inscribed "To Holden Caulfield from Holden Caulfield") (Jones 176). As his fixation grew, Chapman spoke constantly to acquaintances about the significance of the book. He tells Jones:

I really delved into the ink of Holden Caulfield. I was swimming in the ink of *The Catcher in the Rye*. And I was blinded by it. The ink had gotten into my eyes and I was just dripping in the blackness of that ink. It would go on and blind my judgment for years to come. (179)

Of course it is obvious to us (and to Kazin who had written about this phenomenon almost 20 years before) that Chapman is drowning, not in the ink of Salinger's words, but in his own twisted reading of himself—a discourse that he projects onto Salinger's until they become a tangled story of sensitivity, outsiderism, and murder. In a revealing letter to his wife after the murder he writes:

Many times I can't believe it myself—but I have an understanding of it that no one else seems to really understand. It is very simple yet ironically quite complicated. Please re-read *The Catcher in the Rye*. You above all people would be able to understand my deep sensitivity and thoughts. . . . I have fallen off the cliff, I fell a horrible kind of fall. . . . My own sensitivity and perceptions have destroyed me. . . . You never really knew me—you think you do but I'm far more complicated than you can imagine. . . . After I read from *The Catcher in the Rye* in the courtroom I will never speak again. . . . I will suffer, I will be mistreated terribly,

but it must happen. I am a sacrifice of kindness and sensitivity for all. I am *The Catcher in the Rye*. (Jones 223-24)

It is in this mangled discourse of sensitivity that Chapman tries to justify and explain himself. One notes the chilling intertextuality of Chapman and Salinger's words. Chapman's "horrible kind of fall" is almost exactly the "special kind of fall, a horrible kind" that Mr. Antolini warns Holden of in his famous speech (*Catcher* 187). This, in turn, is aligned with the falling children whom Holden, as "Catcher," hopes to save from the adult (fallen) world. Here we get a glimpse of the kind of messianic mission Chapman believed he was undertaking by ridding the world of the phony (adult) Lennon and drawing its attention to the (child-like) truth of *The Catcher in the Rye*.⁹ Ironically, it is in this discourse of fallen innocence that the Salinger-function gets caught:

It was a child that killed John Lennon. It wasn't a man. It was a child killing his hero: the Beatles. It was a child that had been so hurt and rejected into adulthood that he had to cover up all his feelings. I maintained, I preserved my childhood. Even though I'd had twenty-five birthdays, inside I was sixteen years old like Holden Caulfield was. My only feelings were the feelings that came through that book. . . . The child got confused and angered. And since he's so specially linked to the phony adult that I was, the phony adult that the child had created, something had to happen. An explosion had to happen. (42-43)

Not surprisingly, trying to understand this justification without a far more detailed analysis of the Chapman case won't get us very far. However, as part of a reconstructed discourse of sensitivity and identity crisis—an avenue of the Salinger function which, I have noted, recurs frequently—Chapman's story may look increasingly familiar to readers in the 1990s.

If we agree with Kazin that our society "releases" people to think of themselves as endlessly sensitive and alone, it seems that the "sensitive young men" who have become infamous in the 1980s and 1990s have been as likely to buy a gun and shoot their fellow employees at the post office, as to take an innocent stroll through Central Park and meditate on the ducks and the fate of the world's falling children. In a society whose fascination with Hannibal Lecters, Charles Mansons and David Koreshs has raised these figures to the status of cultural icons, if not heroes, we find ourselves increasingly hearing the story of the sensitive outsider

through the story of the psychotic madman. John Guare employs this idea brilliantly in his 1990 drama, *Six Degrees of Separation*. In the play Paul is a delusional young man who has completely constructed a new, clean, upper-class identity for himself. In one of his finest speeches, Paul covertly warns Ouisa and Flan about himself while expounding from his imaginary thesis. The topic of his supposed Harvard thesis, we should not be surprised to learn, centres on the dangers of *The Catcher in the Rye*:

Remember Holden Caulfield—the definitive sensitive youth—wearing his red hunter's cap. "A deer hunter hat? Like hell it is. I sort of closed one eye like I was taking aim at it. This is a people-shooting hat. I shoot people in this hat." . . . I finished the book. It's a touching story, comic because the boy wants to do so much and can't do anything. Hates all phoniness and only lies to others. Wants everyone to like him, is only hateful, and is completely self-involved. In other words, a pretty accurate picture of a male adolescent. (32-33)

The wonderful irony of Paul's extended interpretation of *Catcher* is that he is talking about himself. Paul is the clever, sensitive young man who makes fools (and in one case, indirectly causes the death) of those people whose houses and lives he invades. And yet he does all this only because he desperately wants to fit in, to be loved. Does this story sound familiar?

My intention is not to draw conclusions about Salinger or his works, but simply to watch the unusual arc they chart through these very different networks of cultural exchange (from literary biography to murder media event). Perhaps the only definite conclusion we can reach about these various "readings" of Salinger is to repeat the by now familiar critical disclaimer, that all reading is misreading, though some readings are more interesting—and some more dangerous—than others. Especially with an author like Salinger, whose body of work is minuscule in comparison to the body of work done on him, lines of authorial and "unauthorized" discourse are bound to collapse into one another. Both the cases of Hamilton and Chapman make this fact obvious. In fact, Hamilton ends his biography by lamenting the way that his story and Salinger's have been intertwined:

I can't rejoice that, whatever happens, my name and J. D. Salinger's will be linked in perpetuity as those litigants or foes, in the law school

textbooks, on the shelves of the Supreme Court, and in the minds of everyone who reads this, the "legal" version of my book. (212)

Chapman, on the other hand, at least for part of his story, rejoices at the thought of his name and Salinger's being "linked in perpetuity." While in prison, Chapman regaled all contacts—corrections officers, lawyers, nurses, doctors—with speeches on the importance of Salinger's book (Jones 214-15). He also informs Jones of the extreme importance for him of having a copy of *Catcher* with him in court. He explains in detail how he displayed the book so that court reporters and TV sketch artists could clearly see it (216). In a press release to the *New York Times*, Chapman emphasized the link between himself and the book:

It is my sincere belief that presenting this written statement will not only stimulate the reading of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* but will also help many to understand what has happened. . . . My true hope is that in wanting to find these answers you will read *The Catcher in the Rye*. Thank you. (Qtd. in Bresler 246)

In furtherance of this merging of discourses, Chapman explains how he had copies of the novel brought into his prison cell "by the boxful" which he would inscribe "Mark David Chapman, *The Catcher in the Rye*"—as he had earlier autographed copies with "Holden Caulfield." The palimpsest of Chapman's signature on Salinger's presents a disturbing picture of intertextuality:

I signed them because I knew it would give them a lasting value, that then no one would throw them away. They would give copies to their friends, and I knew it would increase the value of the books. My name became an extension of that book, and the officers kept bringing them in. I would sign my name and write "The Catcher in the Rye" at the bottom of it. I know it's hard to believe there were no thoughts of celebrity when I was autographing those copies of the book, but there wasn't. I simply wanted to make the book as special as possible. (215)

Through this perverse mingling, Chapman's name attains (in fact, appropriates) the power due to Salinger as author. Just as the author's signature would, Chapman's signature gives the inscribed edition "lasting value."¹⁰

If Hamilton's and Chapman's stories have anything in common, and I am leery of finding similarities, it is the all too familiar, yet too often ignored, story of infatuation and hero worship. Hamilton explains:

When I really ask myself how this whole thing began, I have to confess that there was more to it than mere literary whimsy. There was more to it than mere scholarship. Although it will seem ludicrous, perhaps, to hear me say it now, I think the sharpest spur was an infatuation, an infatuation that bowled me over at age seventeen and which it seems I never properly outgrew. Well, I've outgrown it now. (212)

Disclaimer aside, I find Hamilton's admission, to use one of Salinger's favorite words, "touching" and honest. I also have my suspicions that it is a sentiment many "sophisticated" readers harbor but are hesitant to share—whether about Salinger or some other writer of their youth. No doubt this admission implicates me as much as my subjects in this infatuation, which is probably the fairest place for me to be. I do not want to suggest that Hamilton's and Chapman's "infatuations" amount to the same thing, nor that this essay is simply the story of learning to distinguish fiction from reality. If both of them "found" Salinger only as projections of themselves and their very different reading habits, they are in company with all other readers. So what is this story about? I end with a few tentative suggestions.

As I suggested in the beginning of this paper, Salinger's disappearance has both literal and theoretical consequences. Literally, his tantalizing absence is no doubt responsible in part for his continued popularity. His inaccessibility has made him particularly attractive because it allows readers to make of Salinger whatever they wish: from hermetic madman to visionary guru. Furthermore, Salinger's disappearance has intrigued and enticed readers because of the positive kind of Holdenesque marginalization it seems to denote. Salinger exists on the margins of society *by choice*—still collecting his royalty cheques, but unwilling to engage in any kind of dialogue with his reading public. This marginality has suggested to many a kind of moral superiority. It is a stance that seems disinterested, unworldly, and disconnected from the commercial or academic worlds that Salinger's characters so often criticize. It is this kind of superiority, marked not by fanfare but by silence, which many readers identified with in Holden and continue to find appealing in Salinger.

On the theoretical side, Salinger's disappearance shows us in the most obvious ways that it is not the author himself but the author's traces—the gaps into which he endlessly disappears and from which he continually reemerges—that are deserving of our attention as critics. Salinger's popularity has propelled him (generally without his consent) beyond the boundaries of formal literary discourse, where New Critical approaches sometimes sought to contain him, and into a world of more dangerous and volatile cultural discourse. This is a world where his words are as easily appropriated by Jamie on *Mad About You* as they are by Mark David Chapman during his murder trial. With this perspective in mind, I have tried to begin the type of analysis that Foucault imagines at the end of "What is an Author?" when he writes: "Perhaps the time had come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any culture . . ." (137). Salinger has been and will continue to be "modified" in any number of startling ways. That the author of one novel and several dozen stories has seized our culture's attention for so long is testament as much to our need for the kind of story he tells, as it is to the author's undeniable talent for providing this story.

NOTES

1. This appears in the brief dust-jacket notes to *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*.
2. For a dissenting opinion see sociologist Daniel Bertaux who believes that "this unitarian conception is based on the romantic concept of the hero" (Merle 69).
3. I take these words and this phrasing from Foucault 116.
4. *The Inverted Forest*, at about 30,000 words, was described as a "novel" in the December 1947 issue of *Cosmopolitan* where it was published. Hamilton notes that the magazine was swamped with letters of protest from readers who were bewildered by the story (101). As with the majority of Salinger's early stories it was never republished.
5. Indeed Salinger does seem to have been constantly at odds with magazines like *Collier's*, *Esquire*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* which would routinely change his titles and add "cute" illustrations to his stories. This attitude was carried later into Salinger's somewhat obsessive control of the publication of his works in terms of book and jacket design, advertising copy, etc.

6. This point had been noted by several critics. As early as 1958, for example, Geismar deconstructed Holden's "Ivy League Rebellion" in this way: "This is surely the differential revolt of the lonesome rich child, the conspicuous display of leisure-class emotions, the wounded affections, never quite faced, of the upper-class orphan" (Laser and Fruman 76).
7. Both Joel Salzberg in *Critical Essays on Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* (1990) and Jack Salzman in *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye* (1991) include introductory chapters of reception history in which they note the influence of this article.
8. There is much evidence to suggest Chapman believed he would actually *become* Holden Caulfield after killing Lennon, whom he regarded as a phony. See Jones, ch. 21-23.
9. That Chapman believed his hero, John Lennon, had become a phony is extremely clear in Jones's account. For example, Chapman notes: "He told us to imagine no possessions, and there he was, with millions of dollars and yachts and farms and country estates, laughing at people like me who had believed the lies and bought the records and built a big part of our lives around his music. . . . I remember thinking that there was a successful man who had the world on a chain. And there I was not even a link in that chain. Just a person who had no personality. . . . I was thinking all these things, reliving my childhood, as I devoured page after page of that John Lennon book. And at that moment, something inside me just broke" (177). For a much more detailed account of Chapman's act and its relation to *The Catcher in the Rye* see Chapter Four of my MA thesis (Dalhousie U, 1995) "You Must Change Your Life": *J. D. Salinger and the Formative Response*.
10. Chapman's signature has in fact become a valuable commodity. Jones reports that the convict routinely receives requests from individuals and organizations requesting autographs or photos, often to be auctioned off to raise money for various charities.

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