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Hapworth 16, 1924: A Problem In Hagiography

Anthony Quagliano

The creation of a contemporary saint in literature is an enormously difficult task, considering that even the traditional or historical saints are barely credible, at best, to our present age. If it is J. D. Salinger's intention to create a modern saint in Seymour Glass, and I believe this is his intention, then Salinger must at first be credited with a kind of courage for attempting such an unlikely characterization, for his risk, in these secular times, is the alienation of that huge readership which prides itself on urbanity and sophistication. Many critics are put off by Salinger's preoccupation with the world religions, especially the Eastern ones, and accuse the Glass family of false piety, preciousness, or of being unbearably holier-than-thou. More sympathetic critics, including Ihab Hassan, are willing to grant Salinger his spiritual motives, but conclude that "art, unfortunately, sometimes falls short of the best spiritual intentions."¹ With regard to the hyper-sensitive style of *Seymour: An Introduction*, Hassan feels that the apparent confusion in point of view, the blossoming parentheses and other examples of a creeping formlessness, all suggest that Salinger is heading toward an ignominious end in silence, and that the story "may also prove to be Seymour's sprawling epitaph." This conclusion is presumably intended to conform with Taoist or Zen ideals of silence, the implication being that Salinger as writer, in embracing those ideals, has entered a cul-de-sac. The Zen goal of indiscrimination, for example, is taken to be hopelessly impractical for a writer. Maxwell Geismar, opting for the hard line of classical Freudian analysis, reminds Salinger: "But meanwhile, here on earth, it is the legitimate business of the writer in his mortal and un-Zenish career, to make clear just what those 'illusory' differences are between boys and girls, day and night, animals and stones."² I suggest that adopting an overly discriminative, psychologizing, or analytical approach to Salinger's latest stories, thereby ignoring his own preference for spiritual values and religious metaphors, is unfair to Salinger's purposes and leads to under-estimation or beclouding of his achievements. Since Salinger himself rejects psychologizing critics (recall his caustic portrayal of Lane Coutell, author of a paper on the "testicularity of Flaubert"), I think it more appropriate to approach Salinger's Glass stories within their larger religious framework, that is, to approach Salinger on his own terms.

Salinger's latest addition to the Glass family stories, *Hapworth 16, 1924*,³ testifies to his deepening commitment to an asymmetrical narrative form, as it is his most drastic break with the "well-made New Yorker story" tradition. The story is in the form of a long, rambling letter from summer camp, written by the 7-year-old Seymour Glass to his family, who are then touring on the vaudeville circuit. Seymour is accompanied that summer at Hapworth Lake in Maine by his younger

brother, Buddy, who at age five is already showing signs of becoming an excellent writer, having produced “6 new stories, entirely humorous in places, about an English chap recently returned from some stimulating adventures abroad.” (50) (Buddy is destined to become less prolific, however, at least when he turns his attention to the subject of Seymour, a subject which is to become his life’s preoccupation.) In a “plain and bare” prologue to *Hapworth 16, 1924*, the now middle-aged Buddy tells us that Seymour’s letter was recently sent to him by his mother, Bessie, and that “until four hours ago, I had never read (it) before in my life.” (32) He proceeds to reproduce it in full, without further comment. The reader, recalling Buddy’s great anxieties in the past while “authoring” *Seymour: An Introduction*, can sympathize with his decision to let Seymour speak for himself this time.

American readers in recent years have had much exposure to the saccharin kitsch and cuteness of Art Linkletter-like collections of letters from summer camp, so Salinger’s use of this form is a plausible and even witty gambit. The tyke who speaks pearls, writes letters to God, and generally confounds his hapless elders is currently a much favored American myth. Salinger exploits this syndrome of the cute child, then complicates it by insisting on a profound religious sensibility within his character. The 7-year-old Seymour is excessively sweet and affectionate towards his own family, and he also indulges in impish criticisms of the adult world represented by his camp counselor, Mr. Happy, the sweet but inept camp nurse, and the visiting mother of a fellow tyke-camper, among others. “Ah, those touching but exasperating adults, where did they all go wrong?” he seems to be saying, in the tone of a philosophical Dennis the Menace.

But while Seymour is a harsh critic of the boorishness and insensitivity of others, his criticizing faculty is also a source of great anguish to him. He has yet to reconcile the contradictory impulses, so fatal to spiritual perfectionists, to embrace the whole world in harmonious love, and also to inform everyone how to improve the quality of their lives. Salinger is deadly serious about this dilemma; he intends us to accept the crisis of perfectionism as so real that it may have been the cause of Seymour’s eventual suicide. In this regard, this story can be viewed as an ingenious attempt by Salinger to extricate himself from the possible narrative blunder of killing off the most interesting Glass character in the very first story (“A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” 1948). Throughout *Hapworth*, Salinger gives hints about Seymour’s emotional instability, based on his intense spirituality, and he also has Seymour make references to his eventual death. Salinger’s apparent intent is this: if Seymour, age 7, can predict the time of his death (“I personally will live as long as a well-preserved telephone pole, a generous matter of thirty [30] years or more, which is surely nothing to snicker at.” p. 60) and since Seymour did commit suicide at age 30 or 31 in 1948, then Seymour must have indeed been a genuine seer.

But Salinger’s concern is not merely to suggest to the reader that Seymour is a saint (in complete desperation, he could always accomplish this by having Seymour perform a few dazzling, tricky miracles, to the total destruction of his

art), but Seymour's saintliness must be made credible. To this end, Salinger has equipped Seymour with at least all the powers of the 10-year-old genius-seer Teddy, the title character in one of the *Nine Stories*, but he tried to make Seymour appear more human. Teddy is a cold and somewhat mechanical figure who claims to have no emotions because they would be quite useless to him. He does not "love" his parents, he has an "affinity" for them, as he is after all only on borrowed time in this appearance. He also predicts his own death, on either the day of the action of the story, or six years hence. Like an automaton, Teddy passively and punctually walks through his predicted encounter with death, or rather, the natural law of karmic retribution. In short, Teddy is other-worldly, his actions seemingly conforming to the stage directions of some cosmic ritual. His sister, Booper, is the active participant, and by pushing Teddy into the pool she is the one who accrues more bad karma, or acts out the bad karma of her past. Teddy's detachment, it can be argued, is a surer sign that he was enlightened than anything we yet know about Seymour, for death comes to the bodhi-sattva, according to Buddhism, when he desires neither to live nor not-live. In contrast, Seymour is far from detached, although he is able to induce states of such powerful concentration that he can turn off pain in his body, as when he refuses to accept an anaesthetic while taking 11 stitches in a leg wound. However, the bodily control of a yogi is not the complete desirelessness of satori or illumination. Seymour is still bound to earthly, human desires; he gushes with love and affection for Buddy, his parents, and other siblings; he is frequently tender to the point of tears towards some fellow campers, and he is mortally pained by the smallest injustices, oversights, or gaucheries of those around him. As mentioned, his hyper-critical sensitivity is a constant source of genuine pain. Perfectly aware of his human frailties, he says of himself and Buddy: "I am hoping, however, that as we continue to improve and refine our characters by leaps and bounds, striving each day to reduce general snottiness, surface conceits, and too damn much emotion, coupled with several other qualities quite rotten to the core, we will antagonize and inspire less murder, on sight or repute alone, in the hearts of fellow human beings." (56)

Another passage illustrates both his exquisite sensitivity to the feelings of others, and his own almost suicidal instability. When camp counselor Roger Pittman, a Vulgarian in Hassan's terms, manages to insult Buddy ("I thought you were supposed to be such a witty kid.") Seymour threatens to kill him or himself if he ever insults anyone in Seymour's presence again. Writes Seymour:

I believe I could have curbed this criminal urge at the crucial moment, but one must painfully remember that a vein of instability runs through me quite like some turbulent river; this cannot be overlooked; I have left this troublesome instability uncorrected in my previous two appearances to my folly and disgust; it will not be corrected by friendly, cheerful prayer. (44)

Seymour's murderous urge toward Pittman, and his rather petulant threat of

suicide, stem as much from his private low estimation of himself as from any snobbish distaste for the boorish. In an interesting reversal, in which he himself emerges as the Vulgarian, Seymour later describes a “devilish thought” that often haunts him. Speculating on the Indian adept, Vivekananda, Seymour “hopes that he would not have found me too worldly and sensual a person . . . would to God there were a better footing between the unsensual and the sensual persons of this universe. I have no stomach for gaps of that kind; I personally can’t stand it, which is another looming sign of instability.” (92) If the reader chooses to believe that Seymour never does achieve sainthood, either by the design, or failure, of Salinger, then perhaps it was just such a “gap” between Seymour and his wife, Muriel, that drove him to destroy himself 24 years later. Salinger appears to be suggesting this possibility when he emphasizes Seymour’s childish instability and hyper-critical assaults, which are certainly unenlightened traits. But to accept it we also have to assume that Seymour had not significantly changed from his 7th to his 31st year. We have to accept that in the intervening years he was borne along on the “turbulent river” of his instability, unable to work out any of his spiritual dilemmas, despite his presumably heartfelt desire to come to grips with his “snottiness, surface conceits, and quite rotten qualities.” This conclusion is certainly plausible, bearing with it the implication that Seymour was spiritually a failure, unable either to embrace and understand his wife and “worldly” mother-in-law, or to savor God’s first and greatest gift, the gift of life. The story of Seymour Glass would then be a story about the impossibility of saintliness in contemporary American culture; the Jewish-Irish New Yorker with all those remarkable intellectual and psychic powers, and with the purest of intentions, is unable to make a life for the woman he loved so ecstatically, and is unable to sustain his own life. He fails also in the more diffuse, indiscriminate embrace of the world, having never curbed his fatal impulses to criticize and judge. A failure both in eros and agape, for the would-be saint there may be only a self-triggered bullet through the brain.

This reading of the Seymour story also implies a failure, or at least a retreat, on Salinger’s part as well for it is less ambitious to portray a failed saint than an achieved one. Seymour would still be viable as the spiritual center of the Glass family, but his lesson would be one in what to avoid, rather than a lesson by example. If Seymour is thus cut down to size, then Salinger’s ambitions and achievements are equally undercut. But there is another interpretation of Seymour’s life and death, one which assumes that Salinger most steadfastly wishes to convince us that Seymour was a modern bodhi-sattva, an enlightened man. The question of Seymour’s spiritual success revolves around the matter of his suicide, particularly the place of suicide in the doctrine of karma. For it is entirely possible that Seymour, after 24 years of striving, had indeed found the detachment, the disinterest in both life and non-life, that Teddy had achieved at age 10.

Karma is the Sanskrit word for “action,” and is alternately translated as “ful-

fillment of action," "law of justice," or "law of cause and effect." Basically the doctrine states that all the rewards or punishments one receives are the result of the past actions of the individual, including actions in previous appearances. Hence, wicked men can be wealthy and seemingly blessed, and the good can suffer. Similarly, all one's present actions will reap rewards or punishments in the future, perhaps in future appearances. Hence, the "lucky" evil man will suffer in the future, and the good will be rewarded. Besides individual karma, a person accrues family, caste, and national karma as well, but the principle is the same: in the very long run, cosmic justice will be served. The complementary doctrine of reincarnation keeps the wheel of karma going by providing new forms for the individual to inhabit after death. Illumination, or satori, breaks the cycle of death and rebirth, and the awakened man enters Nirvana, the cessation of striving.

The subject of karma is as important to Seymour as it was to Teddy, and neither character can be entirely understood without this general familiarity with the term. Discussing a "ridge of carnality" below Buddy's bottom lip, Seymour says:

I will not harp on the subject of karma, knowing and quite sympathizing with your disdain for my absorbing and accidental interest in the subject, but I give you my word of honor that the ridge in question is little more than a karmic responsibility . . . there is monumental work to be done in this appearance, of partially undisclosed nature . . . (36)

and he resolves not to let carnality distract him too much in this short appearance. Since Seymour believes in karma, we can assume that he is aware of related or subsidiary Eastern doctrines, if not at age 7, then certainly at age 30. We know from Buddy's long letter to Zooey in the short story *Zooey* (1957), that Seymour raised the Glass children on the entire set of Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East*, among other teachings. Seymour must be familiar with the Buddhist ten vows of right conduct, the first five of which, the Pancha Sila, are applicable to all men and are elementary in one's spiritual development. The first vow is: "I vow and promise not to destroy life." This includes animals, other men, and oneself. In itself this condemns suicide as an evil or incorrect act, but as with the similar Judeo-Christian Commandment, there seems to be room for interpretation. The 20th century Buddhist Bhikshu (roughly, priest) Subhadra raises and answers the following questions on the relation of karma to suicide:

Q. Can one escape the consequences of wrong by committing suicide?

A. No; the eternal justice is inexorable and all-powerful. It cannot be evaded.

Q. Is it wrong to commit suicide?

A. No; so long as no wrong is done anyone thereby. For man is perfect master of his own life. This needs no proof. But suicide is a very foolish act, for it violently cuts a thread of life which, according to

the law of karma, has to be taken up again immediately, and under still less favorable conditions than those which the deluded man tried to escape by it.

Q. Why under less favorable conditions?

A. Because our whole existence, with all its conditions, its joys and sorrows, is entirely the result of our doings and our own faults . . . He who, by foolishly committing suicide, tries to escape the suffering which is conducive to his amendment, gives proof of great deficiency of self-knowledge, and of want of capability and will to improve and become wise and good. In his delusion he destroys that fragile, evanescent form which he takes for his real being, and he enters that downward path which, if persisted in, leads him to the dark states of anguish and despair.⁴

Subhadra's catechism would imply that Seymour was foolish and ignorant rather than saintly. But a further interpretation explains what in Buddhism constitutes spiritual justification for suicide. In a more complex treatment of karma and suicide, J. Evola notes:

Since we have seen that the Buddhist asceticism is not limited to detachment, but goes on to penetrate and control the deepest energies of the bodily manifestation, the death of an Awakened One is always of a voluntary nature, at least in the sense of assent, or non-intervention. It has rightly been said that "in order to die, a Buddha must wish to die, otherwise no infirmity can kill him." . . . Buddhism, like stoicism, does not condemn suicide . . . "taking arms"—that is, killing oneself—is not proscribed by the doctrine of the Ariya, always provided that the person in question has actually achieved extinction.⁵

Evola adds that for one who is liberated, "taking one's own life, here, is no more than a wholly irrelevant act, rather like that of someone who, sitting in one position, decides at a certain moment to change it, or who finally chases away an insect which had been buzzing ceaselessly around him and which he had suffered with calm."⁶ However, even an Awakened One cannot choose his time and means of death arbitrarily, for he must consider its impact on those he leaves behind. Seymour, for example, would have had to take into account the effect of his suicide on the spiritual advancement of his wife, Muriel, his mother-in-law, the other Glass family members, and other loved ones. Since "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" gives no clues, we have no idea how carefully Seymour planned and meditated on his suicide, either in the hours he spent lying on the beach, or in the preceding weeks and months. Sending a bullet tearing through the brain need not necessarily be a gesture of defeat, the despair of a perfectionist in an imperfect world; it may also signify the highest spiritual attainment on earth, the final indiscrimination between life and non-life, the cessation of desire, and the entrance into Nirvana.

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Whether or not the reader is convinced of Seymour's saintliness, I think it's clear that Salinger is urging us to opt for the halo. To encourage this choice, he has endowed Seymour with many psychic powers traditionally associated with holy men of East and West, particularly the power of prediction. In the prologue to *Hapworth*, for example, Buddy explains that at the time the letter arrived from Bessie in 1965, he had been working on "a long short story about a particular party, a very consequential party, that she and Seymour and my father and I all went to one night in 1926" (32). Buddy mentions this point to prepare us for the fact that Seymour, in the letter, alludes to this very party, with the astonishing difference that Seymour's letter is dated two years before the event takes place. Seymour's "glimpse" of the party includes "a man, very overweight, who will make us a slightly straightforward business and career offer at his leisure," (61) an offer possibly involving the Glass children's appearances on the "It's a Wise Child" radio show. Whatever the nature of the offer, the second half of Seymour's "glimpse" is more verifiably prophetic, in that Seymour then pictures a greyhaired Buddy at the typewriter, trying to describe this party at a much later date. This, of course, is precisely what Buddy had been doing when Seymour's 41-year-old letter arrived. Buddy's use of the prologue to inform the reader of the accuracy of Seymour's precognitions, or "glimpses," is clearly designed to make us more receptive to the object of Buddy-Salinger's lifelong task, the portrayal of a modern seer and saint.

Seymour's glimpses into the future appear in "two, tantalizing, tiny portals in my mind If it were up to me, I would gladly shut the portals myself; in only three or four cases, such as the present one [the party in 1926, and Buddy's later attempt to describe it] is the nature of the glimpse worth the wear and tear on one's normalness and blessed peace of mind, as well as the unembarrassment of one's parents" (62). Such occult powers, known in Buddhism as "iddhis," are a sign of very great spiritual advancement, and are entirely distinct from Seymour's prodigious intellectual powers. By being slightly embarrassed and inhospitable toward these glimpses, he is also showing the right attitude of reverence since iddhis "appear when the neophyte has produced within himself the moral strength and purity which will make it impossible ever to use them for selfish ends."⁷ Seymour accurately prophesies that Buddy "will be swiftly and subtly guiding every child in the family long after I am quite burned out and useless or out of the picture," (39) along with his prediction about his own 30 year life span.

In addition to his glimpses into the future, Seymour can also remember past appearances, an especially rare power. He asks his local librarian to send him some mid-19th century magazines, containing "articles about a very dear friend of mine, purely by correspondence, in my last appearance, quite frankly, Sir William Rowan Hamilton! I am very seldom able to do this, which is quite a blessing in disguise, but I can see his friendly, lonely, sociable face before me, at wide intervals!" (108) Teddy had this power also, recalling that his last appearance was as an Indian "making very nice spiritual advancement" until "I

met a lady, and I sort of stopped meditating.”⁸ (Muriel Glass may be just such a distracting lady, if you choose to reject the halo.) In Buddhism the ability to remember a past life in the chain of karma is a sign, if not of complete enlightenment, of extreme righteousness and high spiritual advancement. The crucial point here is that if Salinger wishes us to accept Seymour as enlightened at age 7, then Seymour would be enlightened up to and including his last instant on earth, for satori is permanent, there is no regression for a bodhi-sattva. If Seymour was not yet enlightened at 7, there are still the 24 missing years within which anything may have happened, including enlightenment. My judgment is that Salinger intends to fill in some of those missing years, and therefore that he will continue to produce Seymour Glass stories in an effort at further dispelling the mystery, and enriching the improbable characterization of his contemporary American saint.

Salinger has not published a new Glass story since 1965, and my expectation of future stories is not shared by most critics. A number of them, including Geismar and Hassan, conclude that Salinger has written himself into a corner and that he has nowhere to go but into the silence so esteemed in Zen and its Chinese predecessor, Taoism. They suggest that the move from well-made “New Yorker” construction to the relative formlessness of the letters, telephone calls, and constant asides which mark the latest stories, signifies a new theme: the breakdown in communication between not only the Glasses, but all of us as well. Salinger’s religious preoccupations are non-literary, they imply, and a dealer in words can’t afford the luxury of golden but silent communication. Admittedly there is a parallel in Seymour’s own writing career, starting with the Hapworth letter. Seymour himself says: “I am personally very hopeful that great layers of unnatural, affected, stilted fustian and rotten, disagreeable words will drop off my young body like flies during the crucial period to come!” (113) Seymour winds up as a composer of haikus, the briefest form in literature. But Salinger is not necessarily doomed to silence, for as Hassan perhaps wryly pointed out, Thomas Carlyle was successful “in extolling the virtue of silence through twenty volumes.”⁹ The strictly analytical approach preferred by some critics ignores the Oriental predilection, which Salinger seems to share, for paradox, which is the mode of the koan and other forms of Zen teaching. The fact that one can be Taoist and also a writer, as was Chuang Tzu, or a Zen Buddhist and poet as was Basho among many others, is not disturbing to the Oriental mind. The ancient Taoists had a term, “pure-talk,” meaning discussion of the impossibility of discussion. They believed that verbal instruction is useful as a first step, that is, to instruct one away from words. This is a paradox, but since such “pure-talk” is permissible, a natural writer such as Salinger has a way out; he can remain a writer without compromising whatever Taoist or Zen ideals he may hold as a contemporary sentient being. “The state of a Buddha,” Evola points out, “can only be understood by one who is himself a Buddha. To describe it in words is a task that would have been beyond the power of the son of the Sakya himself.”¹⁰ So it may be true that Salinger has written himself into a

corner, but far from dooming him to silence, his intense spiritual idealism may well be the necessary sustenance, as well as being the subject matter, of his highly ambitious literary career.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Ihab Hassan, "J. D. Salinger: Rare Quixotic Gesture," *Western Review*, 21 (Summer 1957), 261-281. Reprinted in *Salinger*, ed. Henry Grunwald (New York, 1962), p. 152.
- ² Maxwell Geismar, "The Wise Child and the *New Yorker* School of Fiction," in *Salinger*, ed. Grunwald, p. 101.
- ³ J[erome] D[avid] Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," *New Yorker*, June 19, 1965, pp. 32-113. Subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text.
- ⁴ Subhadra Bhikshu, *A Buddhist Catechism* (New York, 1920), p. 54.
- ⁵ J. Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening* (London, 1951), p. 242.
- ⁶ Evola, p. 243.
- ⁷ Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (London, 1962), p. 117.
- ⁸ J. D. Salinger, "Teddy," *Nine Stories* (New York, 1953), p. 287.
- ⁹ Hassan, p. 152.
- ¹⁰ Evola, p. 281.

