

SALINGER'S SILENCE AND UPDIKE'S WORDS

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Certain figures in American literature have been treated in pairs for the purpose of better understanding what kind of literature they have created and sometimes because they themselves or the nature of their view of experience have suggested that a comparison might be useful: Hawthorne and Melville, Whitman and Whitman, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and Salinger and John Updike are such a pair.

Both Salinger and Updike have written about loneliness and the ways individuals cope with their needs for love and a sense of meaning. Paradoxically, Salinger's characters, who seem at first to be more lonely and more distrustful of social institutions, ultimately communicate, moving beyond language into a private peace characterized by silence. On the other hand, Updike's men and women, although they are defined in terms of the social context of family, marriage, and work, often fail to "connect" with each other. Frequently, the only comfort they find consists of a verbal and aesthetic appreciation of their own loneliness.

Salinger's silence is a product of his profound sense of the limits of language and the inability of words to capture the essence of human experience. He is a writer who has chosen to write about the inner life, the private world of the individual, and to do so in a way that is both subtle and powerful. His characters are often young people who are struggling to find their way in a world that seems to be full of noise and confusion. They are people who are looking for a sense of meaning and purpose, and who are often disappointed. Salinger's silence is a way of saying that there are things that cannot be said, and that sometimes the best way to express these things is through art.

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Salinger's identity as the prophet of silence and Updike's status as the wizard of words seem borne out by their publication history. Salinger's last story appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965, while Updike produces fiction and non-fiction at a prodigious rate. Updike once commented somewhat cryptically on Salinger's disappearance from the pages of the magazine in which they both appeared. He told an interviewer that Salinger's "silence is a lesson to us all." Salinger has chosen not to reply to this pronouncement, but one can almost imagine his response to consist of the Zen koan which is the epigraph for *Nine Stories*:

We know the sound of two hands clapping.
But what is the sound of one hand clapping?

Salinger has written a small but excellent body of fiction in which the conflict between isolation and society is reflected in the tendency towards silence as a mystical state which can be very social. The critic Ihab Hassan perceptively describes Salinger's preoccupation with two kinds of characters: "the Responsive Outsider" who comes in conflict with "the Assertive Vulgarian" who represents the insensitive egotistical world.¹ Often Salinger's "quixotic" figures cross the gap between their elitist loneliness and the vulgar world and make a commitment to society. Updike is also asking what seem to me to be major questions in American literature: Where can the individual find fulfillment? Alone or with others? By himself or through his social identity and his ties to social institutions? But his conclusions are different from Salinger's. Updike may initially locate his characters in society, but the effect of his style is to show that private sensations and perceptions are the true source of regeneration. Salinger timidly says "yes" to other people; Updike boldly closes the door to his study and embraces his baroque aestheticism.

The concern both writers have for the relationship between the individual and other people is reflected in their special attitudes towards words and language and is most obvious in the dialogue they use in their fiction. The typical Salinger dialogue often presents two quite separate people who manage in the space of a few minutes to communicate and emerge changed by the conversation. The characteristic Updike dialogue does not result in people being changed, but rather shows them re-enforcing the attitudes they had before they began the conversation. Moreover, Salinger is a highly dramatic writer who often gives us whole sections of dialogue without much authorial intrusion. The detailed descriptions of the rooms and bathrooms in which these conversations take place are given to us before the dialogue begins. Updike, on the other hand, frequently neglects to provide the reader with much drama or conflict and intrudes as narrator into the dialogue as a kind of description-making chorus.

The first dialogue we can examine is the exchange between lonely Holden Caulfield and the tired New York cab driver who somehow manages to become impregnated with the hero's own obsessive fear of death. Once the cabby admits he knows the lake in Central Park, Holden asks:

¹ *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 261.

"...you know the ducks that swim around in it? In springtime and all? Do you happen to know where they go in the winter-time, by any chance?"

"Where the *who* goes?"

"The ducks. Do you know, by any chance? I mean does somebody come around in a truck or something and take them away, or do they fly away by themselves—go south or something?"²

To this first question the cabby angrily replies: "How the hell should I know?" The cab driver's anger is already a give-away that he has become involved in Holden's problem. As the dialogue progresses the cabby comes up with a theory about how the fish survive the winter: "Their bodies take in nutrition and all, right through the goddam seaweed and crap that's in the ice." The cab driver ends fully involved and delivers a statement of his faith in nature's benevolence: "If you was a fish, Mother Nature'd take care of *you*, wouldn't she?" (p. 83). Holden seeks to accept the inevitability of death, which, like the memory of his dead brother Allie, haunts him and prevents him from leading his own life.

John Updike's George Caldwell, the hero of his best novel, *The Centaur*, is also obsessed with death, which in his case is much closer than Holden's. In fact, George Caldwell's death at the end of the novel is a welcome release. At one point, Caldwell sees a minister, Reverend March, attending a high-school basketball game and attempts to hold a dialogue with him about religion. Implicitly he is seeking to discuss his own fears of death. After George asks about the difference between the Lutherans and the Calvinists, the minister cuts him short: "A basketball game is no place to discuss such matters. Why don't you come and visit me in my study sometime."³ By asking about ducks and speaking of fish the Salinger characters in a random meeting have a real conversation, whereas this highly social encounter between clergyman and Christian skims the surface of chatter and only re-enforces Caldwell's basic loneliness and anxiety.

Both Salinger and Updike are geniuses at capturing the awkwardness of adolescence, but in one case the teen-agers seem able to achieve a brief rapport with someone else, while in the other, the

² J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951: rpt. New York: Bantam, 1964), pp. 81-82. All quotations from *The Catcher in the Rye* are from this edition and will be cited in the text.

³ *The Centaur* (1963: rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1964), p. 189.

individual's hyper-sensitivity, especially to visual impressions, must serve as a compensation for the lack of rapport. Ginnie Manno in Salinger's story "Just Before the War with the Eskimos" does reach the self-centered young man with the bleeding finger, and, in a more profound way, Esmé communicates with the American sergeant in "For Esmé with Love and Squalor."

One of Updike's stories, "A Sense of Shelter," portrays William Young's attempts to tell his high-school companion that he loves her. William stutters, but not so severely that he cannot state his love for Mary Landis. His sense impressions give him the courage to speak:

The stairway, all asphalt and iron, smelled of galoshes. It felt more secret than the hall, more specially theirs; there was something magical in its shifting multiplicity of planes as they descended that lifted the spell on his tongue, so that the words came as his feet pattered on the steps.⁴

Once he tells her that he loves her, he expects that that will be the end of the conversation. It is typical of the Updike hero that expressing the emotion "I love you" is thought to be the end of a conversation instead of the beginning of a relationship: "He expected her to laugh and go out the door, but instead she showed an unforeseeable willingness to discuss this awkward matter."

She wants to talk about his feelings but he wants to get rid of her and of this embarrassing topic: "Half in impatience to close the account, he asked, 'Will you marry me?'" Having tried to say "I love you" hoping to be free of her, he is certain that if he asks her to marry him, she will at last go away. No such luck. She replies: "You don't want to marry me. . . . You're going to be a great man."

Like the hero of Henry James' story, William Young seems destined to have a sense of impending greatness without personal love. The beast in Updike's jungle seems to be the destiny of the writer whose verbal powers create and contribute to his distance from the human community. If Updike were not such a brilliant stylist, we might grow impatient with his dialogues which are so often interrupted by asides and descriptions. But much of the pleasure to be found in reading him comes from watching him turn phrases and build up flashy metaphors that accompany his suburban dramas. The contrast between Updike's style and his suburban

⁴ "A Sense of Shelter," in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 96.

themes often makes a novel such as *Couples*, or the Richard and Joan Maple stories, seem like watching Archie Bunker while listening to Handel's *Messiah*.

One of Updike's narrators, in fact, self-consciously reflects on his verbal powers. This is a further reminder of how Updike's great faith is in art:

A blue jay lights on a twig outside my window. Momentarily sturdy he stands astraddle, his dingy rump towards me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette, the predatory curve of his beak stamped on a sky almost white above the misty tawny March. See him. I do, and snapping the chain of my thought, I have reached through glass and seized him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is, "astraddle," rump "dingy," his head "alertly frozen." A curious trick, possibly useless, but mine.⁵

"Curious" in Shakespeare's time meant "highly wrought" and "intricately made" as well as "odd" and "strange." Updike's style is both well-crafted and odd and strange. These qualities make him resemble a baroque poet. He also seems baroque in his use of metaphors and analogies and in the use, at the level of plot, of mythic counterpointing, as in *The Centaur*. Like a baroque writer he writes for an educated audience that is both world weary and yet naïvely looking for new miracles. His baroque metaphors often call as much attention to themselves as they do to the situation they mean to describe. A good example is the sustained metaphor he develops in a story called "Twin Beds in Rome."

And their love making, like a perversely healthy child whose growth defies every deficiency of nutrition, continued; when their tongues at last fell silent, their bodies collapsed together as two mute armies might gratefully mingle, released from the absurd hostilities decreed by two mad kings. Bleeding, mangled, reverently laid in its tomb a dozen times, their marriage could not die. Burning to leave one another, they left, out of marital habit, together. They took a trip to Rome.⁶

The metaphysical tradition which lies behind this kind of metaphor is best noted by recalling a passage from John Donne's poem, "The

⁵ "Leaves," in *The Music School* (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 52-53.

⁶ "Twin Beds in Rome," in *The Music School*, p. 76.

Ecstasy," in which a comparison is made between two armies that face each other on the battlefield and two lovers who lie looking at each other on a bank:

As 'twixt two equal armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which, to advance their state,
Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.⁷

Both Updike and Donne employ an extravagant set of metaphors which in each case introduces the idea of war as an analogy to love, and both writers make us highly conscious of language itself. Donne's seventeenth-century lyric describes a Platonic love which is negotiating its way into physical love, and so his declaration is the prelude to ecstasy. Updike's passage describes the breakdown of reason and his lovers seem instead to be headed towards divorce. Donne means to celebrate the social love between two people, while Updike's main faith is in language itself.

For Updike language is the means of finding the miraculous in the ordinary. He once told an interviewer: "Everything can be as interesting as every other thing. An old milk carton is worth a rose."⁸ Updike practices his verbal alchemy by making the old milk carton as interesting as a rose. But like King Midas he often turns everything his pen touches into gold and so has nothing to eat. That is to say, at times Updike seems to describe without discriminating; at times we feel his world to be a solipsistic one because his beautiful words democratically give milk cartons and roses the same value. Although he often portrays clergymen, his true religion is his art. Reverend Eccles in *Rabbit Run*, Reverend March in *The Centaur*, and the priapic priest in *A Month of Sundays* reveal Updike's concern for religion and his dissatisfaction with the modern church. As a literary artist, Updike seems to possess a Catholic sensibility with a Protestant mind; as a writer he wants all the symbols, colors, and iconography of the Mass, but since he has no faith in miracles, he must invent them himself through his metaphor-laden style.

⁷ Text edited from *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 1, pp. 51-52.

⁸ Told to Jane Howard, cited in *Contemporary Authors* (Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1962), Vols. 1-4, p. 953.

J.D. Salinger also has religious yearnings, but he does not sublimate them into a religion of art. He secularizes them so that his characters have Insights with a capital I. They seem to enjoy bursts of awareness which partake of both Christianity and Zen Buddhism. This mixture often baffles and charms the reader rather than instructing him. Ihab Hassan explained Salinger's enormous popularity in the 1950s and 1960s by declaring that he was the only American author to combine satire with a serious quest for love and religious salvation.⁹ Franny Glass's emotional breakdown, for example, is sympathetically described, while the Ivy League setting is cleverly satirized. Franny is one of several Salinger characters whose artistic vocation could have been the occasion for a celebration of art *per se*, but Salinger resists this.

In addition to Franny and Zooey, who are actors, Salinger portrays an aspiring painter in "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period." This young man finds hope for salvation not in his painting but in a new interest in American girls in tennis shorts. John Gedsudski in "The Laughing Man" is also an artist, a gifted story-teller; but because the line between his personal life and his story-telling is so blurred, he kills off his imaginary hero just because his girlfriend has left him. The death of this fictional hero unnecessarily saddens and frightens his audience of little boys. Seymour Glass is, we are told, a very great poet, but his habit of putting catsup on everything he eats is only one of many ways in which he is shown to choose the joys of ordinary life over the grandiose artistic ones. Thus Salinger esteems and identifies closely with the poet, the actor, the painter, and the story teller, but he resists the cult of the artist which Updike embraces.

Salinger's main theme is a quasi-religious one; he seeks the answers to two questions: how to live in the world—a fairly common theme in the modern novel—and, not so common, how to love the world. Both themes lead us to silence. Salinger portrays people who succeed in finding answers to these questions and people who do not. He offers us many contrasts between characters who gain Insight, and who therefore move beyond words into sleep and silence, and characters who suffer and remain trapped in a world of words.

In the character of Franny Glass, both positions are portrayed. "Franny" ends with the heroine repeating the words of the Jesus prayer: "Alone, Franny lay quite still, looking at the ceiling. Her lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move."¹⁰

⁹ *Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972* (New York: Ungar, 1973), p. 43.
¹⁰ Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 43.

In the sequel, "Zooney," Franny's emotional paralysis and disgust at the world's egotism continues, until her brother, using a variety of therapeutic roles and disguises, manages to help her to Insight by telling her that the Fat Lady is "Christ Himself, buddy." In other words, for Franny to be the best actress she can be for the sake of the most uneducated member of the audience is to be acting for Christ, or at least for the Fat Lady as Christ. After this perception, Franny falls "into a deep, dreamless sleep" (p. 201).

The pattern, then, of these questing Salinger characters is that they first descend into the world of vulgar words, and then they either gain Insight and escape into sleep or they do not gain illumination and they remain imprisoned in the world of words, the world of limited meaning.

Sergeant X in "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" has the dialogue in the tea shop with Esmé and then goes to war. He emerges so horrified and shell-shocked that he is unable to sleep until he receives a package containing Esmé's father's watch and a letter from her. Esmé's charming way of speaking and writing is an essential part of the story as illustrated by the title, which is taken from her instructions that the sergeant write a story of squalor for her. But words are conveyers of unhappy realities, and she has to spell the word "slain" so that her little brother won't understand it when she explains how her father died. However, after the words and the war, and after the letter and the broken watch, imaging the end of clock time, Sergeant X can at last fall asleep.

But for Eloise, who asked, "I was a nice girl. . . wasn't I?" in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," there is no sleep.¹¹ This fact is poignantly emphasized by the ending, in which she sadly leaves the room where her daughter is happily sleeping. Eloise's alcoholic suburban existence hath murdered sleep.

It is the word "kike" spoken by the maid in "Down at the Dinghy" which upsets the young boy Lionel even though he does not know the meaning of this word. The impact of "kike" is softened when we hear Lionel tell his mother that a "kike. . . is one of those things that go up in the air. . . with a string you hold."¹²

Words are often dirty in Salinger's world. Lane Coutell says that Flaubert was a good writer because he was "not a word squeezer," he just wrote. We can recall, too, Holden Caulfield's disgust that "Fuck you" is written on the walls of his sister's school. He tries to rub the words out so that the children will not see them, but he admits that it

¹¹ Salinger, "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," in *Nine Stories* (1953; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 38.

¹² Salinger, "Down at the Dinghy," in *Nine Stories*, p. 86.

is a hopeless project: "If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even half the 'Fuck you' signs in the world" (p. 202).

A stronger instance of words as corrupting can be seen in Holden's desire to hitchhike out West and become a deaf-mute and be done with language once and for all:

I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone. They'd let me put gas and oil in their stupid cars, and they'd pay me a salary and all for it, and I'd build me a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life. I'd build it right near the woods, but not right in them, because I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time. I'd cook all my own food, and later on, if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a goddam piece of paper, like everybody else. If we had any children, we'd hide them somewhere. We could buy them a lot of books and teach them how to read and write by ourselves. (pp. 198-99)

Although Holden's desire to reject other people and escape from society is comically softened by his assumption that in his role as a deaf-mute gas-station attendant he can manage to marry and raise children too, the dominant emphasis is on words as corrupting. By the end of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger manages to show that Holden has overcome his hostility to the world and has accepted his own present self. An extended analysis of the motif of falling would show how the last paragraph illustrates again his newly gained recognition that he cannot protect all the vulnerable children and that people often survive their falls. The correction his sister Phoebe made in his recollection of the Robert Burns poem, "Coming through the rye," from which the novel's title is taken, also underscores this shift in his attitudes. Holden no longer wants to "catch" people but only to meet them "coming through the rye." In the last paragraph

he sees his sister on the merry-go-round as he sits happily in what some consider to be a baptismal rain. He says:

The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them. (p. 211)

Salinger strove to show that Holden reversed his negative feelings towards society and decided not to run away. In the same affirmative spirit, the concept of the deaf-mute also undergoes social rehabilitation. In "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters," Buddy Glass tells about the day Seymour eloped with his bride and left the angry wedding guests stranded in a traffic jam on a hot summer day in New York City. As Buddy grows nervous that the garrulous matron of honor will discover that he is the brother of the absent groom, he is consoled by the silence of the bride's uncle. He is a tiny elderly man, less than five feet tall, who sits holding a cigar and wearing a top hat. He can offer Buddy unbroken silence because he is a deaf-mute. He may also be a figure of the artist, since in order to communicate he must carry pencil and paper and write messages to people. Although he may recall the writer, his social involvement is not in doubt. The deaf-mute uncle in "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters" is just the opposite of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who prevents a guest from attending a wedding and who talks incessantly about his fearful experiences. The tiny uncle with the unlit cigar of course does not speak and is in fact attending a wedding, and so suggests the socially involved man whose silence is regenerative. Buddy Glass finds such solace in his silence that he confesses all his feelings to the deaf-mute and then falls asleep. He later discovers that the deaf-mute has departed, having left behind the remains of the cigar he lit up at last, itself an emblem of consummation as we learn that Seymour did marry Muriel, but privately. Buddy concludes:

I still rather think his cigar end should have been forwarded on to Seymour, the usual run of wedding gifts being what it is. Just the cigar, in a small, nice box. Possibly with a blank sheet of paper enclosed, by way of explanation.¹⁵

The blank sheet which will explain things is in the same league with the sound of one hand clapping.

¹⁵ Salinger, "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," published with "Seymour An Introduction" (1963; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1965), p. 92.

Thus Salinger's characters descend into the fallen world of words and often find insight and earn sleep while others remain unreleased. The happy deaf-mute in "Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters" shows Salinger reworking the antisocial feelings expressed in Holden's vision and striking a compromise between withdrawal and participation.

Salinger appears to be a writer who reworks a few basic ideas creating a small but intricate Zen-Christian garden, while Updike ranges restlessly about the world in quest of new topics and new settings. Salinger zeroes in on the Glass family and stays there. Seymour's suicide, which makes its appearance in "A Perfect Day for Banana Fish," published in 1948, comes to be a central issue or off-stage concern in nearly half of Salinger's work. As he did with the idea of the deaf-mute, Salinger reworks and transforms the idea of suicide.

The suicide of the talented and lovable genius, Seymour Glass is an act of hostility and escape which Salinger reworks in the form of the motif of sleep: that sleep which ends the successful quests of his world-weary pilgrims.

Perhaps sleep is the socially acceptable form of suicide. It is the brief death of the burning consciousness which nature often allows us. "Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care." Moreover, the setting in which Seymour kills himself suggests that his death is a violent sleep. After talking with the little girl on the beach, Sybil, Seymour has angry words with a woman in the elevator and goes into his hotel room. There he lies on the twin bed and looks at his wife, who is asleep, and then he blows his brains out.

In "Seymour An Introduction," Buddy Glass nearly puts the reader to sleep with his wordy monologue concerning his brother's talents. Finally, after many literary references and parentheses, Buddy Glass seems to have accepted Seymour's death and, like Franny, he is willing to act in this selfish world. Acting for Franny was understood in terms of the pun, because to act for her meant to act on the stage. Acting for Buddy means finding the strength to go teach his next English class at a girl's college where all the students are just back from their weekend at Yale. As it does for Herzog and for Huck Finn, release takes the form of not having to write anymore. Buddy concludes by saying:

This thought manages to stun me: There's no place I'd really rather go right now than into Room 307. Seymour once said that all we do our whole lives is go from one

little piece of Holy Ground to the next. Is he *never* wrong?
Just go to bed, now. Quickly. Quickly and slowly.
(p. 213)

Updike's stories, however, usually end with a clever epigrammatic sentence, and we have the sense of the author trying to get one more word in. His first novel, *Poorhouse Fair*, ends with one of the characters, Hook, consciously searching for the single word which would be of some consolation to his dying friend. One Updike novel actually does end with the characters falling asleep, but the voice of the author continues to address us like a disk jockey on a radio accidentally left on. Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit Redux* lies in a motel bed beside his wife and he feels her to be:

... soft as flight, fat's inward curve, slack, his babies from
her belly. He finds this inward curve and slips along it.
Sleeps. He. She. Sleeps. O.K.?¹⁴

Salinger's heroes find consolation in unexpected conversations with strangers or with strange relatives, and then move beyond language into silence and sleep; but Updike's fiction leaves us listening not to the sound of one hand clapping, but to a solitary speaker who is asking "O.K.?" even as he prepares to write still another novel filled with beautiful, restless words.

¹⁴ Updike, *Rabbit Redux*. (1971: rpt. New York: Fawcett, 1972), p. 352.