



"Catcher" in and out of History

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Critical Response

I

Catcher in and out of History

James E. Miller, Jr.

Carol and Richard Ohmann, in "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*" (*Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1976), remind us that J. D. Salinger's youthful novel is a quarter century old. The reminder comes as a shock to me personally, inasmuch as I find myself given some prominence among those "Critics" of the title: as the co-author, with Arthur Heiserman, of one of the first critical essays on *Catcher* ("J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff," 1956) and as the author of the 1965 Minnesota pamphlet on Salinger. The Ohmanns treat both the article and the booklet with great tact and tenderness, while at the same time using them as focal points for their considerable disagreements. I do not want to come to the defense of these aging critical works, although I am tempted to identify in the early essay the flashes of genius in the passages written by the late Arthur Heiserman when he was young and energetic and we both were afire with ideas and plans. Both of us were bemused as we watched our essay become enshrined in a succession of Salinger casebooks: it had the distinction of being singled out as a target by George Steiner in a blast against the university critical enterprise in a piece entitled "The Salinger Industry." As the Salinger mania faded, Arthur and I sighed to ourselves that at least the anti-academic critics would not have our article to kick around anymore.

My Minnesota pamphlet on Salinger came after Salinger's lapse into silence, and soon after its appearance, Salinger seemed to fade from the public consciousness. But though he no longer appeared on the covers of *Time*, his novel was still and still is avidly read, especially by high school students the age of Holden Caulfield (16–17). I found this out when students coming into my contemporary American novel courses demonstrated such familiarity with *Catcher* that I dropped it from my

reading list. I long ago assumed that *Catcher*, like *Billy Budd* and *Turn of the Screw*, had been so intensively examined by critics that little if anything was left to say. But I clearly reckoned without the Ohmanns and what might be termed a Marxist or neo-Marxist approach.

The Ohmann essay begins its argument by quoting headlines and editorials that appeared the day of *Catcher's* publication (stories and commentaries revolving around the hot war in Korea and the cold war with Russia) and then goes on to show how the reviews of *Catcher* (and the critical essays on it) ignored the novel's relation to its moment in time and in effect "removed it from history" by concentrating on its universal elements. The essay can best speak for itself: *Catcher* is defined in essence as "a serious critical mimesis of bourgeois life in the Eastern United States, ca. 1950—of snobbery, privilege, class injury, culture as a badge of superiority, sexual exploitation, education subordinated to status, warped social feeling, competitiveness, stunted human possibility, the list could go on. Salinger is astute in imaging these hurtful things, though not in explaining them." These themes, we are told, are "central to the book's meaning and to the impact it has on us." The book's readers ("adults, at least") are "won to Holden's values—equality, spontaneity, brotherhood—but sense that these values cannot be realized within extant social forms. The novel draws readers into a powerful longing for what-could-be, and at the same time interposes what-is, as an unchanging and immovable reality."¹

Although the Ohmanns introduce some qualifiers in these summary generalizations, their reading of *Catcher* and their view of its limitations are in reality comprehensive and exclusive. If the reader grants their generalizations, he is likely to find that other views or approaches embodying his experience of the novel are no longer tenable. A close glance at the Ohmann reading reveals it as simplistic: Holden's warm, human values are pitted against a cold, selfish society; Holden's (and Salinger's) main failure (the "confusion of the novel") is in choosing only between rejoining or dropping out from this bourgeois, capitalistic society instead of opting for radical—that is, socialist—change.

Few would want to deny a political-economic dimension to *Catcher*, and it is possibly true that this dimension has been slighted in past criticism. But to see Holden's malaise of spirit solely or even mainly

1. See p. 35.

James E. Miller, Jr., author of "Henry James in Reality" (*Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1976) and numerous books and articles on American literature, responds in this essay to Carol and Richard Ohmann's "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*" (Autumn 1976). The Ohmanns' answer will appear in our Summer issue.

caused by the evils of a capitalistic society is surely myopic; and to envision a utopian socialistic society (even were we to grant its possible creation) as miraculously erasing all the problems Holden faces is naive. The problems of a sensitive and perceptive adolescent moving painfully to maturity can never be solved by restructuring society politically and economically.

Early in the novel we hear Holden on his history teacher, "Old Spencer": ". . . you wondered what the heck he was still living for. I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him."² We learn that Holden's brother Allie died of leukemia some years before the novel opens, and that Holden has kept his memory alive through his baseball mitt on which Allie had copied out Emily Dickinson poems. In the dormitory room next to Holden's lives the unfortunate Robert Ackley, with "lousy teeth" that "always looked mossy and awful," who had "a lot of pimples" and a "terrible personality"—a "sort of nasty guy" (p. 19). When Holden's roommate Stradlater refuses to tell Holden whether he made it or not with Holden's friend Jane Gallagher, Holden strikes out and is struck down, bleeding. Over and over again Holden complains that nobody ever gives your message to anybody. Over and over again we hear Holden cry out: "I felt so lonesome, all of a sudden. I almost wished I was dead" (p. 48).

This catalogue of characters, incidents, expressions could be extended indefinitely, all of them suggesting that Holden's sickness of soul is something deeper than economic or political, that his revulsion at life is not limited to social and monetary inequities, but at something in the nature of life itself—the decrepitude of the aged, the physical repulsiveness of the pimpled, the disappearance and dissolution of the dead, the terrors (and enticements) of sex, the hauntedness of human aloneness, the panic of individual isolation. Headlines about Korea, Dean Acheson, and the cold war seem, if not irrelevant, essentially wide of the mark—if we define the mark as the heart and soul of *Catcher*.

The important comic scene in which Holden is victimized by the elevator operator Maurice and the prostitute Sunny surely must be read as something more than a revelation of "sexual exploitation" in a capitalistic society. The economic-political reading of the novel tends to pass over without mention Holden's groping about in desperation to come to terms with his sexuality, which both fascinates and threatens, lures and depresses him. His sexual feelings are central to the maturing process he is undergoing, and they lie obscurely behind his tender feelings for (and secret envy of) the various children he encounters: they

2. *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Little, Brown, 1951; rpt. Bantam, 1964), pp. 6–7. All further page references appear after quotations in the text.

remain in the pre-adult world of unsullied innocence. The title of the novel itself directs attention to Holden's dream, which he reveals to Phoebe, of standing on the edge of "some crazy cliff" near a playing field of rye, catching the kids before they fall over the cliff: the fall would surely be into sexuality, experience, adulthood.

It is difficult to see how the Marxist reading might come to terms with the crucial scene near the end of the novel, when Holden wakes up in fright to find his old and trusted teacher, Mr. Antolini, patting him on the head. Holden rushes away, to wonder later whether he had done the right thing, whether Antolini was really a "flit"—or a genuine friend in a generally hostile world. This self-questioning sets off a chain of events that brings Holden to a confrontation with his own death as he descends into the Egyptian tomb at the museum, sees again the ubiquitous obscene phrase he has rubbed off of Phoebe's school walls, and envisions his own tombstone with his name, the years of entry and exit, and the phrase pursuing him into imagined death—"Fuck you" (p. 204). It is shortly after this that Holden, refusing to agree to Phoebe's running away to the west with him, announces that he has decided to stay—to rejoin the human race. As he watches Phoebe going around and around on the carrousel, grabbing for the gold ring, he realizes that he cannot shield her from experience: "If they [the kids] fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (p. 211). And the action of the novel closes as Holden feels so "damn happy" that he is "damn near bawling" watching Phoebe going around and around: he has fallen and survived, and he has discovered that he can be happy in the presence of an innocence he no longer has—without being a catcher in the rye.

The Ohmanns consider that the "shortcomings of [*Catcher's*] awareness and its art" are manifest in its failure to show that Holden had an option of working for a better society. It is not at all clear, however, that Holden refuses this option. Mr. Antolini, in one of the novel's deepest moments, quotes Wilhelm Stekel to Holden: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one" (p. 188). The comment comes at a critical turning-point for Holden, and is certainly lodged firmly in his psyche. But of course it is true that Holden does not turn his face into the sunrise at the end of the novel, expressing his determination to overthrow the bourgeois capitalistic society in favor of a socialist utopia. Indeed, the whole thrust of the novel seems to suggest that there is no social or political or economic structure that could insure sexual tranquility, banish pimples, outlaw old age, abolish death—or that would relieve Holden or any other human being of the tragic implications of his physical, sexual, emotional nature: to these he must reconcile himself, recognizing not only the "shortcomings" of man but also the "shortcomings" of himself.

But Holden is not so shortsighted, I think, as the Ohmanns suggest.

In the closing lines of the novel, he confesses of the tale he has told: "I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (p. 214). The Ohmanns consider this confession an overlay of "nostalgia." If it strikes them as naive or sentimental, it is hard to understand how they can believe so fiercely in a socialist utopia that must surely be based on some kind and measure of the human love—agape, not eros alone—Holden has attained at the end of *Catcher*. If a utopia is established without this kind of mutual love and understanding, is it not likely to turn into the kind of dictatorship with which the twentieth century is so familiar? In any event, the Ohmanns might have recognized that Holden has been awakened to a precondition of a better society—love of fellow human beings—before condemning Salinger for not instilling Holden with a vision of the kind of ideal state that has never existed before and seems not to exist now.

Would we really want Salinger to recycle the visions of *Looking Backward* or *A Traveler from Altruria*? The experience of the twentieth century has forced the literary imagination to portray the dark underside of such bright visions—as in *Brave New World* and *1984*. Holden joins a long succession of American "heroes" (Hawthorne's, Melville's, James', Twain's, and more) in discovering that experience is inevitably made up of good and bad, love and hate, light and dark. The Ohmanns have censured previous critics for removing *Catcher* from history. Do they not propose at the end to carry Holden out of baffling, muddled history into a tidy and clear-cut ideology?