
CHAPTER III - RAISE HIGH THE ROOF BEAM, CARPENTERS
AND
SEYMOUR : AN INTRODUCTION

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I

The present dissertation is basically concerned with the later stories of Salinger. However, wherever necessary attention has been paid to his early works as well. This in discussing Franny and Zooey we used The Catcher in the Rye as a convenient point of departure. In discussing the last two works of Salinger some of the stories collected in his Nine Stories (1953) provide a similar convenient point of departure. Nine Stories can be divided into two groups of six and three stories respectively. The first group includes stories such as Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut, Just Before the War with the Eskimos, The Laughing Man, Down and the Dingy, For Esme - With Love and Squalor, Pretty Mouth and Green my Eyes and the second group includes the stories such as A Perfect Day for Bananafish, De Danmier - Smith's Blue Period and Teddy. The stories in the first group describe a world of suffering and estrangement. The stories in the second group which are relevant for our purpose were are concerned with the world of Mysticism and spiritual ecstasy. They depict a community of sanits, mystics and visionaries. People like Teddy and Seymour are members of this community. Two characters in the second group of stories Seymour who figures in A Perfect Day for Bananafish and Teddy the hero of the story named after him are

of special relevance here. The suicide of Seymour and death of Teddy _____ assuming that he dies in accordance with his own prediction _____ are particularly considerable. Seymour's suicide if we connect with the later account provided by Buddy Glass is the natural end of a mystic career, while Teddy's death as he himself would see it is not that at all. But it is a link in the unending chain of incarnations and reincarnations. Both these heroes expose the quotidian world with all its inadequacy _____ in the world of psychiatrists, the world of Lane Cautell's and people like him. Seymour shoots himself with the natural poise of a visionary. The same poise is shown by Teddy also. The only difference is that he is more articulate about his intuition than Seymour. He makes fun of psychiatrists and other social institutions, because they fail to give insight into things as they are! Hence Teddy offers a rival system of education which stresses pure intuition and meditation going beyond names and labels into the very essence of reality.

I think I'd first just assemble all the children together and show them how to meditate. I'd try to show them how to find out who they are, not just what their names are and things like that I guess, even before that I'd get them to empty out

everything their parents and everybody ever told them. I mean even if their parents just told them an elephant's big, I would make them empty that out.... I'd just make them vomit up every bit of the apple their parents and everybody made them take a bite out of. ¹

The foregoing analysis of Nine Stories is offered here for two reasons: One, it provides us a convenient point of departure for our approach to the last two stories of Salinger; two, Seymour is a character whom we meet in Nine Stories as well as in the last two stories.

Teddy the natural mystic in Nine Stories speaks with a blue-print of Utopian community in his pocket. As we have seen, he would like to establish an alternative system of education which would give children an insight into "things as they are", without names and labels, frozen in a kind stasis. All children cannot grow the way Teddy wants them to, but some children could. These are the Glass children. There is, therefore, an essential link between Seymour, Teddy of Nine Stories and Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction.

II

Raise High The Roof Beam, Carpenters (1955) might almost be described as a defence of Seymour. In the earlier Seymour story, Salinger had already exposed the inadequacy of the quotidian world with psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. He now offers us a more comprehensive statement at the centre of which is Seymour's marriage with Muriel.

Instructed by Boo Boo, Buddy Glass comes to New York to attend this marriage. There he runs into Helen Salisbury, Muriel's aunt, the Matron of Honour, her husband who is a lieutenant and a deaf-mute man who turns out to be Muriel's father's uncle. All of them get into a car to go to the bride's place. A great deal of the conversation in the car is about Seymour, monopolised by Helen Salisbury and the Matron of Honour. They cite incidents after incidents to prove what they consider to be Seymour's abnormality and perversion because they are not sure about Seymour being a normal man. The Matron of Honour in fact goes to the extent of accusing Seymour of being a homosexual. She also quotes the incident of Seymour once hitting a girl with a stone. She is all sorry for Muriel but fails to understand how she could

come to accept such a man as Seymour as her husband. Later, they all come to Buddy's apartment because their cars get stuck up on the Fifth Avenue. And here the Matron of Honour makes her charge more specific. She tells Buddy:

That's probably what's the matter with that brother of yours', the Head said, 'I mean you lead an absolutely freak-sh life like that when you're a kid, and so naturally you never learn to grow up. You never learn to relate to normal people or anything. That's exactly what Mrs. Fedder was saying in that crazy bedroom a couple of hours ago. But exactly. Your brother's never learned to relate to anybody. All he can do, apparently, is go around giving people a bunch of stiches in their faces. He's absolutely unfit for marriage or 'anything' halfway normal, for goodness' sake. ²

In reply to these charges from the Matron of Honour, Buddy bursts into a passionate defense by saying that Seymour is a poet:

I said that not one God-damn person, of all the patronizing, fourth-rate critics and column writers, had ever seen him for what he really was. A poet, for God's sake. And I mean a poet. If

he never wrote a line of poetry, he could still flash what he had at you with the back of his ear if he wanted to. ³

The real answer however comes from the diary of Seymour himself. Seymour notes Muriel's simplicity and says he loves her for it. He also refers to a letter by Buddy in which he (Buddy) had said he did not like Muriel's mother ——— and then records his own response to this:

I don't think Buddy could see her for what she is. A person deprived, for her life, of any understanding of taste for the main current of poetry that flows through things, all things. She might as well be dead, and yet she goes on loving, stopping off at delicatessens, seeing her analyst, consuming a novel every night, putting on her girdle, plotting for Muriel's health and prosperity. I love her. I find her unimaginably brave. ⁴

"See her for what she is" ——— obviously as echo of Teddy's, "see things as they are" ——— is Seymour's way of relating himself to people. He looks for the current of poetry that flows through all things and in order to do this he says:

I'll champion indiscriminatio~~n~~ till doomsday, on the ground that it leads to health and a kind of very real, enviable happiness. Followed purely it's the way of the Tao, and undoubtedly the highest way. ⁵

Buddy gathers strength from this diary and goes back to speak to — of all people — a deaf-mute man who has been with them all along. He asks him, "Who looks after you? The pigeons in the park?" and then goes on to describe how Charlotte got the nine stitches she did. It is a fitting finale that in this context of mystic, spiritual 'indiscrimination'. Buddy establishes his final communication in the story with a man, who, being deaf and mute, is constitutionally incapable of communication.

III

The thematic connections we have established between Nine Stories and Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and the analysis of the spiritual concerns of Salinger as revealed in these works greatly help us in analysing their style. As we have already seen, Salinger's stylistic strategy in Franny and Zooey is to strongly accentuate the

metaphoric order of language and reality by displacing into parodic mode the metonymic order. In Faise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters, there seems to be a subtle change in the strategy. Witness for instance the opening passage and part of the story that Seymour reads out to his ten month old sister:

One night some twenty years ago, during a siege of mumps in our enormous family, my youngest sister, Franny, was moved, crib and all, into the ostensibly germ-free room I shared with my eldest brother, Seymour. I was fifteen, Seymour was seventeen. Along about two in the morning, the new roommate's crying wakened me. I lay in a still, neutral position for a few minutes, listening to the racket, till I heard, or felt, Seymour stir in the bed next to mine. In those days, we kept a flashlight on the night table between us, for emergencies that, as far as I remember, never arose. Seymour turned it on and got out of bed. 'The bottle's on the stove, Mother said,' I told him. 'I gave it to her a little while ago,' Seymour said. 'She isn't hungry.' He went over in the dark to a bookcase and beamed the flashlight slowly back and forth along the stacks. I sat up in bed. 'What are you going to do?' I said. 'I thought maybe I'd read something to her,' Seymour said, and took down a book.

'She's ten months old, for God's sake,'
I said. 'I know,' Seymour said. 'They
have ears. They can hear.'

The story Seymour read to Franny
that night, by flashlight, was a
favourite of his, a Taoist tale. To this
day, Franny swears that she remembers
Seymour reading it to her. ⁶

.....

What Kao keeps in view is the
spiritual mechanism. In making sure of
the essential, he forgets the homely
details; intent on the inward qualities,
he loses sight of the external. He sees
what he wants to see, and not what he does
not want to see. He looks at the things
he ought to look at, and neglect those
that need not be looked at. ⁷

A close analysis of the passage reveals that
Salinger's technique here is not to put metonymy into a
parodic context but to achieve a foregrounding of the
metaphoric order by gradually pushing into the background
the metonymic order. In the passage quoted above, lexical ^a
items such as mumps, crib, bottle, hunger together estab-
lish narrative prose based on contiguity and combination.
A break in this metonymic continuity is provided when
Seymour takes down a book and starts reading out Taoist

tale to his ten month old sister crying in the crib. As we come to the close of the tale which is about a superlative horse, we find that the metaphoric order is so foregrounded as to completely push into the background the metonymic principle. "Spiritual mechanism" becomes more important than the physical object. "Somely details" are forgotten in favour of the "essential", "inward qualities" are stressed at the expense of the "external". What begins as a traditional, third person narrative using tropes of metonymy ends up as a metaphoric perception of reality and language.

In a passage such as the following, describing the wedding, we still have narrative prose in which linguistic units are planted in verbal space in terms of contiguity and combination. Here is an example, to use Jakobson's words, of a realist author who metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the settings:

At twenty minutes past four - or, to put it another, blunter way, an hour and twenty minutes past what seemed to be all reasonable hope - the unmarried bride, her head down a parent stationed on either side, of her, was helped out of the building and conducted, fragilely, down a long flight of stone steps to the sidewalk. She was then deposited -



almost hand over hand, it seemed - into the first of the sleek black hired cars that were waiting, double-parked, at the curb. It was an excessively graphic moment - a tabloid moment - and, as tabloid moments go, it had its full complement of eyewitnesses, for the wedding guests (myself among them) had already begun to pour out of the building, however decorously, in alert, not to say goggle-eyed, droves. If there was any even faintly lenitive aspect of the spectacle, the weather itself was responsible for it. The June sun was so hot and so glaring, of such multi-flashbulblike mediacy, that the image of the bride, as she made her almost invalidated way down the stone steps, tended to blur were blurring mattered most. ³

This kind of direct metonymic projection of phenomerial details is not however a major feature of style in Raise High the Roof, Beam, Carpenters. Its real stylistic strenght, which is also part of its theme and vision, lies in projecting a metaphoric perception of the mystic significance of things and people. As the following passage amply exemplifies:

I have scars on my hands from touching certain people. Once, in the park, when Franny was still in the carriage, I put my hand on the downy pate of her head and left it there too long. Another time, at Loew's Seventy-

second Street, with Zooey during a spooky movie. He was about six or seven, and he went under the seat to avoid watching a scary scene. I put my hand on his head, Certain heads, certain colours and textures of human hair leave permanent marks on me. Other things, too. Charlotte once ran away from me, outside the studio, and I grabbed her dress to stop her, to keep her near me. A yellow cotton dress I loved because it was too long for her. I still have a lemon-yellow mark on the palm of my right hand. Oh, God, if I'm anything by a clinical name, I'm a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy.⁹

IV

Seymour: An Introduction is a portrait of Seymour as a poet, saint. In a sense, Salinger does not add anything new to what has already been said about Seymour in earlier works. The focus in this story is however direct and therefore more illuminating than it was earlier. The theme of this story is thus basically an extension and also intensification of the image of Seymour as projected in the earlier related stories. Salinger describes in this story a series of incidents and some seminal epiphanic moments of vision and ecstasy, which goes into the making of Seymour's

total personality. Salinger gives a detailed description of Seymour's idea of poetry with special reference to Japanese haiku poetry. He offers an elaborate description of Seymour's person — his hair, eyes, nose, face etc. He shows the roots of Seymour's personality in Jain-Buddhism, Vedanta and Upanishada not to speak of the Bible. He portrays Seymour as a Karma-yogi and Dnyan-yogi roled into one. He describes at length the influence on Seymour of the concept of Niskam-karma. Buddy Glass describes these philosophical implication of the method of marble shooting adopted by Seymour:

.....that after Seymour himself shot a marble, he would be all smiles when he heard a responsive click of glass striking glass, but it never appeared to be clear to him whose winning click it was. And it's also a fact that someone almost invariably had to pick up the marble he'd won and hand it to him. ¹⁰

Seymour thus radiates mystic significance and sainthood in all his physical features, action and thoughts.

From the point of style Seymour-An Introduction poses a series of fascinating problems. Given the central message of all the Seymour stories emphasizing indiscrimi- nation in mystic terms an ultimate undifferentiating vision

and the current poetry running through all things. Seymour: An Introduction accentuates a kind of circularity in which the beginning and the end merge into a mystic perception. In this sense one can say that Salinger's introduction to Seymour turns out to be the conclusion of his art. What significant is that these thematic challenges are accepted on the level of style where the circularity of mystic vision is acted out in verbal terms.

Seymour: An Introduction shows a fine awareness of this complex relationship between meaning and medium. Style in this story therefore incorporates a strange circularity. This strange circularity in formal turns becomes self reflexive where Salinger writes a short story to raise some problems about the form of the story itself. Syntax in such a stylistic concerns with form and function of the narrative spills over into parentheses, disjointed, loose, laconic expressions, hyphenated constructions, deliberate digressions, in the middle of a sentence and passage, words of direct address to the reader who the author suspect is invisible:

And while I think an ecstatically happy prose writer can do many good things on the printed page - the best things, I'm frankly hoping. it's also, true, and infinitely more self-evident, I suspect, that he can't be

moderate or temperate or beif; he loses very nearly all his short paragraphs. He can't be detached - or only very rarely and suspicioulsy, on down-waves. In the wake of anything as large and consuming as happiness, he necessarily forfeits the much smaller but, for a writer, always rather exquisite pleasure of appearing on the page serenely sitting on a fence. Worst of all, I think, he's no longer in a position to look after the reader's most immediate want; namely, to see the author get the hell on with his troy. Hence, in part, that ominous offering of parentheses a few sentences back. I'm aware that a good many perfectly intelligent people can't stand parenthetical comments while a story's purportedly being told. (We're advised of these things by mail - mostly, granted, by thesis preparers with very natural, caty urges to write us under the table in their off-campus time. But we read, and usually we believe; good, bad, or indifferent, any string of English words holds our attention as if it came from Prospero himslef.) I'm here to advise that not only will my asides run rampant from this point on (I'm not sure, in fact, that there won't be a footnote or two) but I fully intend, from time to time, to jump us personally on the reader's back when I see something off the beaten plot line that looks excisitng or imeresting and worth steering toward. 11

The concerns with style and form as seen with this passage escalate into a sharp pointed awareness as in the following confession on the part of the narrator Buddy Glass:

But on this occasion I'm anything but a short-story writer where my brother is concerned. What I am, I think, is a thesaurus of undetached prefatory remarks about him. I believe I essentially remain what I've almost always been - a narrator, but one with extremely pressing personal needs. I want to introduce, I want to describe, I want to distribute mementos, amulets, I want to break out my wallet and pass around snapshots, I want to follow my nose. In this mood, I don't dare go anywhere near the short-story form. It eats up fat little undetached writers like me whole. ¹²

Obviously as Ihab Hassan says style as used here moves in the direction of the anti-form from the point of view of the relationship between the metonymic and metaphoric order. This raises some curious problems. As we have already seen a major purpose of Seymour: An Introduction is to draw a portrait of Seymour. For this purpose Salinger gives an elaborate description of Seymours physique - his hair, eyes, nose, face, hands, voice,

clothing, his sports interests etc. Here for instance is a description of Seymour's nose:

All right, The Nose. I tell myself this'll only hurt a minute.

If, any time between 1919 and 1948, you came into a crowded room where Seymour and I were present, there would possibly be only one way, but it would be foolproof, of knowing that he and I were brothers. That would be by the noses and chins. The chins, of course, I can breezily diskiss in a minute by saying we almost didn't have any. Noses, however, we emphatically had, and they were close to being identical: two great, fleshy, drooping, trompe-like affairs that were different from every other nose in the family except, all too vividly, that of dear old Great Grandfather Zozo, whose own nose, ballooning out from an early daguerreotype, used to alarm me considerably as a small boy. (Come to think of it, Seymour, who never made, shall I say, anatomical jokes, once rather surprised me by wondering whether our noses- his, mine, Great-Grandfather Zozo's- posed the same bedtime dilemma that certain beards do, meaning did we sleep with them outside or inside the covers.) There's a risk, though, of sounding too airy about this. I'd like to make it very clear - offensively, so if need be - that they

were definitely not romantic Cyrano protuberances. (Which is a dangerous subject on all counts, I think, in this brave new psychoanalytical world, where almost everybody as a matter of course knows which came first, Cyrano's nose or his wisecracks, and where there's a widespread, international clinical hush for all the big-nosed chaps who are endeniably tongue-tied.) I think the only difference worth mentioning in the general breadth, length, and contours of our two noses was that there was a very notable bend, I'm obliged to say, to the right, an extra lopsidedness, at the bridge of Seymour's nose. Seymour always suspected that it made my nose partician by comparison. The 'bend' was acquired when someone in the family was rather dreamily making practice swings with a baseball bat in the hall of our old apartment on Riverside Drive. His nose was never set after the mistap.

Hurrah. The nose is over, I'm
going to bed. ¹³

When one looks at this passage in which a detailed description of Seymour's nose is given, one would expect a realistic, naturalistic prose style, using metonymic principles of contiguity and combination. What Salinger has done in the above passage is to deconstruct the

metonymic order into an ultimate awareness of the metaphor. What we see in the style is a transformation of metonymic close-up into a metaphoric montage. Metonymic realism is made as it were stand on its head thereby releasing a kind of stylistic energy moving in the direction of "anti-form".