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*Hyakujo's Geese, Amban's Doughnuts
and Rilke's Carrousel: Sources East
and West for Salinger's Catcher*

Zen koans are supra-logical spiritual projects meant to be worked on full-time. Even when the monk is not formally meditating, the koan continues to resonate from the hinterlands of consciousness, suffusing every thought, word and deed with its impenetrable mystery. So, as Holden Caulfield dutifully attends to the wisdom dispensed to him by his history teacher Mr. Spencer upon his dismissal from Pency Prep, in the back of his mind an odd question lingers and asserts itself: "I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park . . . wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over."¹ Holden, of course, knows nothing of Zen, but Salinger wants the *reader* to think of him as working on a koan. The matter of the Central Park ducks, silly though it be on the surface, is to bedevil Holden throughout his lost Christmas weekend in New York City and, like a good koan, will not leave him alone until he comes to terms with the central problem of his life, that is, with his so-called *life* koan, which the ducks symbolize.

Although the topic of Zen in Salinger's writings has often been addressed, coverage has been limited primarily to the fiction collected and published subsequent to *The Catcher in The Rye*—fiction in which the Zen theme is explicit.² Among those few commentators who have searched for traces of Zen in *Catcher* in particular,³ one finds interesting speculation as

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well as enlightening discussion of Buddhism in the broad generic sense, but not a single unequivocal reference to the unique Sino-Japanese form of Buddhism known as Zen. This is especially mystifying in the case of Rosen, ninety percent of whose monograph is devoted to the topic. Alsen, perhaps the most authoritative voice on the subject of Salinger's interest in Eastern religion (123–164), takes the fictive Buddy Glass' self-characterization as reflective of the author, insisting that Zen is far less important in Salinger's work than "the New and Old Testaments, Advaita Vedanta, and classical Taoism" (134).

This is an odd state of affairs. Since Zen figures so prominently in *Nine Stories*,⁴ the compositional chronology of which overlaps that of *Catcher*, and so explicitly in the conversational fabric of "Zooney," one would expect to find at least some evidence of it in *Catcher*, the more so since, according to Skow⁵ and Lundquist (70–71), Salinger had been immersed in Zen studies at least since the mid 1940s. Yet *Catcher* is apparently Zen-less. I propose, by way of explanation, that there are indeed traces of Zen in *Catcher*, at least two traces that are quite subtle, seamlessly woven as they are into character and narrative. They are hence easily overlooked, but nevertheless unequivocal once they are linked to their proper sources in Zen lore. The remainder of this essay purports to establish this linkage and, in so doing, to evoke our appreciation of the way the scenes in question symbolically enrich Holden's characterization. This, in turn, should significantly modify and deepen our understanding of the shifting circumstances of Salinger's interest in Zen.

Symbolic echoes of other literature in the work of a great writer are usually a matter of deliberate encoding. This, however, does not preclude a significant degree of spontaneity from the process, as such echoes often tend, as it were on their own, to insinuate themselves in clusters, or even to coalesce in the writer's imagination, much in the way of what Freud called the "overdetermined" or condensed imagery of dreams. Analogous to the dreamer, who has his entire personal history to draw upon in shaping his unconscious narrative, the well-read writer in the throes of creation has a vast "inner library" of texts at his disposal, and the particular focus of that writer's interest in any given moment will tend to draw ("check out") certain of these stored texts to itself metonymically and virtually without effort. As a more or less automatic process, then, literary allusions in texts often freely intermingle, paying no heed to a future interpreter's need for discrete thematic taxonomies or stylistic levels.

Such is the case with Salinger's novel, for it turns out that we cannot fully appreciate the symbolic significance of Zen for Holden Caulfield's final spiritual catharsis without noting its fusion in the penultimate chapter with an allusion to a key image from the work, not of an ancient Chinese or Japanese sage, but of a modern German poet, who, though implicitly Zen-like in many ways, yet most likely had no formal acquaintance with that religion. I refer to none other than Rainer Maria Rilke and his renowned *Dinggedicht*,

“Das Karrussell.” In Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, it would seem that sources East and West not only meet but indeed become mutually determining.

Hyakujo's Geese

The first trace of Zen in Salinger’s novel takes us back to the above-mentioned ducks, which appear four times in the narrative, in each instance as a seemingly superfluous preoccupation of Holden’s. After their introduction as a “quirky mental distraction” during his farewell talk with Mr. Spencer, they recur as a “spontaneous question” put by Holden to the first cabby in chapter nine, then again in conversation with the second cabby in chapter twelve, and finally in chapter twenty as the object of a desperate nocturnal search. Viewed together the four instances form a kind of *leitmotif* structured by a sense of increasing urgency, very much like the build-up of tension that leads to the sudden breakthrough to solution in koan meditation practice.

It is likely this odd blend, of emotional urgency on Holden’s part with a seeming irrelevance of the ducks to the narrative in any logical or figurative sense, that initially calls one’s attention to them. If the attending reader should happen to be familiar with Zen folklore, he might suddenly recognize the ducks’ symbolic derivation therein, at which point it would become quite obvious that these “extraneous” fowl lie right at the heart of Holden’s identity crisis. Salinger’s source for the motif is an anecdote contained in D. T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)* which initially appeared in New York in August of 1949 while the author was hard at work on the first draft of *Catcher*.⁶ In Essay 5, entitled “On Satori—The Revelation of a New Truth in Zen Buddhism,” Suzuki relates the following:

Hyakujo (Pai-chang Huai-hai, 724–814) one day went out attending his master Baso (Ma-tsu). A flock of wild geese was seen flying and Baso asked:

“What are they?”

“They are wild geese, sir.”

“Whither are they flying?”

“They have flown away, sir.”

Baso, abruptly taking hold of Hyakujo’s nose, gave it a twist. Overcome with pain, Hyakujo cried aloud: “Oh! Oh!”

“You say they have flown away,” Baso said, “but all the same they have been here from the very beginning.”

This made Hyakujo’s back wet with cold perspiration. He had satori.⁷

Here the master is testing his student’s insight by means of a *mondo*, that is, a sudden question meant to evoke the latter’s delusive view on some significant

spiritual matter—in this case, the relationship between change and permanence. Hyakujo’s conventionally one-sided view of the issue, which sees only change (ducks coming and going), is thrown up to him through Baso’s carefully timed nasal shock tactic. The master senses that his mature student needs only a little jolt, some deft act of “compassionate cruelty,” to precipitate in him that final *salto mortale* from ignorance to Wisdom. As Hyakujo cries out in pain, the master suddenly calls his attention to the other side of the issue (“all the same they have been here from the very beginning”): change and permanence, the transitory and the abiding, are one and the same, an inseparable identity of opposites. From the Zen point of view, to resolve one contradiction is to resolve them all (since the distinction between the one and the many is itself a delusion). This instantaneous coalescence in his consciousness of all that has heretofore been separate is Hyakujo’s satori or Enlightenment. Having propelled the monk from his long-suffering state of separative dualism into the rarefied atmosphere of Enlightened monism, Master Baso’s *mondo* has served its purpose.

Holden’s preoccupation with the ducks is clearly a symbolic extension of this traditional Zen anecdote as recounted in Suzuki’s *Essays*. Hyakujo’s *mondo* becomes Holden’s koan, a koan that embodies the core conflict of his life: how can he hang onto the innocence of childhood while moving, inexorably, into the phony world of adulthood, or, how can he discover that changeless, inviolate innocence that never flies away but “all the same has been here from the very beginning.” His brother Allie had found a way to preserve it (as Holden sees it): he died. To the living that is, of course, a one-sided solution: a loved one who dies has made himself inaccessible to change in the minds and hearts of the survivors. Such a denouement falls short of the absolutist standards of Zen, in particular of the koan, which demands a solution that somehow includes both terms of the contradiction: both change and permanence, corruption and innocence, in a seamless *coincidentia oppositorum*. In a word, Holden is trying to do the impossible. It will indeed take nothing less than a death to accomplish this, not biological death, but that much more difficult death of the ego, the mystics’ “death before death,” a conscious and voluntary surrender that is prelude to Enlightenment, the spiritual condition in which all conflicts and contradictions are resolved “suddenly,” and forever.⁸

With the ducks’ first appearance—in Holden’s consciousness during that farewell chat with Mr. Spencer—Salinger makes allusion to an interesting aspect of koan psychology: even when the aspirant allows the koan to move from the center to the periphery of his attention so that he can take up other tasks, the koan continues to exert its influence. Though the monk has stopped working on it, it continues to work on him. Kapleau says of this subliminal dimension of koan work: “. . . once the koan grips the heart and mind . . . the inquiry goes on ceaselessly in the subconscious. While the mind is occupied

with a particular task, the question fades from consciousness, surfacing naturally as soon as the action is over, not unlike a moving stream which now and again disappears underground only to reappear and resume its open course without interrupting its onward flow.” Thus, as Holden tells us:

The funny thing is, though, I was sort of thinking of something else while I shot the bull [with Mr. Spencer]. . . . I was wondering where the [Central Park] ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away.

I'm lucky, though. I mean I could shoot the old bull to old Spencer and think about those ducks at the same time. It's funny. You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher.(13)

Since Holden is only half-listening to Mr. Spencer's sage counsel, the thing that is really on his mind is able to surface in consciousness.

In the three subsequent duck-episodes there is, as noted, a pattern of growing tension as the issue takes on for Holden the tightening grip of an obsession. As one Rinzai master put it in terms of *Mu*, the fundamental Zen koan: “[You must reach the point where you feel] as though you had swallowed a red-hot iron ball that you cannot disgorge despite your every effort.”¹⁰ This sense of entrapment by the issue, of feeling utterly unable either to advance or retreat from it, while at the same time compelled to do something, is fertile ground for the lightning flash of insight. During his first cab ride through Central Park in chapter nine, Holden puts the question to the surly cabby: “You know those ducks in that lagoon right near Central Park South? That little lake? By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over? Do you happen to know, by any chance?” (60). In verbalizing his concern Holden begins to experience the unsettling ubiquity of the koan as it spreads from the private inner to the outer social domain. At the same time he is becoming aware of its frustrating imponderability. For a koan to be effective, the meditator must at some point come up against its diamond-hard resistance to reason, otherwise he will not be driven to arouse his own latent supra-rational resources: “I realized [in asking the cabby] it was only one chance in a million” (60).

Later on, this time in Horwitz's cab, Holden presses the issue further: “Hey, Horwitz. . . . You ever pass by the lagoon in Central Park? . . . Well, you know the ducks that swim around in it? In the springtime and all? Do you happen to know where they go in the wintertime, by any chance?” (81). Unlike his predecessor who dismissed Holden's question with contempt, this cabby engages him in a mock-comic round of what is known in Zen as “dharma duelling,” defined by Kapleau as “a verbal joust or battle of ‘wit’ as respects the

dharma, usually between two enlightened persons” (363). Here Horwitz takes the role of Holden’s/Hyakujo’s enlightened master whose task it is to pry his student loose from a one-sided view of things: whereas Holden continues to brood obsessively on the ephemeral (the vanished ducks, with their unconscious associations to his brother’s death and to the impending “death” of his own innocence), Horwitz aggressively calls his attention to the fish frozen in the lagoon which embody constancy:

“The *fish* don’t go no place. They stay right where they are, the fish. Right in the goddam, lake.”

“The fish—that’s different. The fish is different. I’m talking about the ducks,” I said.

“What’s different about it? Nothin’s different about it,” Horwitz said. . . . “Use your head, for Chrissake.”(82)

Unlike the mature Hyakujo who teeters on the brink of insight, needing only a sharp tweak of the nose to transcend the logical boundaries of his own mind, Holden stays mired in his “Dark Night,” continuing to struggle and resist the master’s Truth: “You don’t think them fish just *die* when it gets to be winter, do ya?” “No, but—” (83).

The fourth and final duck-episode, occurring several hours (and drinks) later, finds Holden wandering around Central Park in half-drunken confusion as he presses on with the quest: “I figured I’d go by that little lake and see what the hell the ducks were doing, see if they were around or not” (153). After much fruitless groping and stumbling, “Then, finally, I found it. What it was, it was partly frozen and partly not frozen. But I didn’t see any ducks around. I walked all around the whole damn lake—I damn near fell *in* once, in fact—but I didn’t see a single duck” (154).

There are in this sequence several allusions to the traditional ordeal of the spiritual path, allusions that are subtle yet unmistakable when viewed in a Zen context. For example, just as the masters warn of sorely testing periods of melancholy, so Holden complains, “I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome. . . . I wasn’t tired or anything. I just felt blue as hell” (153–154). Also, as one would expect, the motif of darkness is emphasized: “Boy, was it dark. . . . I kept walking and walking, and it kept getting darker and darker and spookier and spookier” (154). Kapleau points out that “In Zen it is said that ‘the grand round mirror of wisdom is as black as pitch’” and quotes his teacher Yasutani Roshi’s version of St. John’s “Dark Night of the Soul”: “To renounce such conceptions [i.e., what one presumes to know of the way the world works] is to stand in ‘darkness.’ Now, satori comes out of this ‘darkness,’ not out of the ‘light’ of reason and worldly knowledge” (118).

In its subjective aspect, the darkness motif embodies the anguish of being utterly lost. As another master, Shibayama, has it: "the koan will mercilessly take away all our intellect and knowledge. In short, the role of the koan is not to lead us to satori easily, but on the contrary to make us lose our way and drive us to despair" (qtd. in Kapleau 71). Thus Holden, even in the park's familiar surroundings: "I had the most terrific trouble finding that lagoon that night. I *knew* right where it was—it was right near Central Park South and all—but I still couldn't find it" (154).

Finally, there is Holden's eventual discovery of the duckless lagoon, "partly frozen and partly not frozen." The qualities of frozenness and fluidity echo Holden's life koan, that is, the painful contradiction between permanence and change, symbolically played out earlier in Holden's duck/ fish "dharma duel" with Horwitz. The half-and-half or neither/nor aspect of the lagoon's state alludes to the prickly razor's-edge nature of koan work which prevents the meditator from lapsing into either (or, for that matter, *any*) logical position suggested by the koan. Only the Middle Way, a central tenet of Buddhism, leads by its very a-positional "narrowness" to the promised land of Enlightenment, to the ineffable *coincidentia oppositorum* in which all dualities are transcended, all contradictions resolved. Holden has not yet arrived at the promised land ("But I couldn't find any [ducks]" [154]), but he is, at this point, well along the path.

Although Salinger nowhere mentions Suzuki's *Essays* by name as his source for the ducks, the circumstantial evidence for his having worked with this well-known introductory text during the writing of *Catcher* is compelling. As Hamilton tells us, "From summer 1949 to summer 1950 he seems to have worked flat out on the novel" (113). The British Rider edition of the *Essays in Zen Buddhism* came out in both London and New York in August of 1949. The first American edition of the book appeared in New York City on May 10, 1950, published by HarperCollins (then called "Harper Brothers").¹¹ The publication of *Catcher* by Little, Brown and Co. just over a year later, on July 16, 1951, means that Suzuki's book was available to Salinger in its earlier British edition during his writing of the novel's first draft and, in its American edition, during his completion of the draft in spring and summer 1950. This is not to mention the all-important months of revision extending through winter and spring 1951 preceding publication in July.

I say "all-important months of revision" because it was Salinger's working style not simply to revise and edit his stories but virtually to rewrite them again and again, often incorporating in the rewriting, as suggested earlier, new elements culled from various interesting books that came his way (Hamilton 167–168). When one considers that Salinger fancied himself a Zen bibliophile,¹² that he makes several references to D. T. Suzuki in the Glass stories, revealing his affinity for this renowned transmitter of Zen culture, and that

he can be definitely linked to at least *one* other early 50's book of Suzuki's,¹³ it seems virtually certain that a copy of the *Essays* lay not far from the typewriter during his completion of the first draft and revisions of *Catcher*.

Amban's Doughnuts

The second reference in *Catcher* to a specific Zen source occurs only once, in chapter 25, as Holden walks uptown from Grand Central Station the next morning looking for a place to have breakfast. In the wake of his tearful reunion with Phoebe and traumatic encounter with Mr. Antolini, Holden's spirits have reached their lowest ebb ("I think I was more depressed than I ever was in my whole life" [194]). Beset by morbid hypochondriacal thoughts ("So I figured I was getting cancer" [196]), he thinks he might feel better with something in his stomach:

So I went in this very cheap-looking restaurant and had doughnuts and coffee. Only, I didn't eat the doughnuts. I couldn't swallow them too well. The thing is, if you get very depressed about something, it's hard as hell to swallow. The waiter was very nice, though. He took them back without charging me. I just drank the coffee. (196)

Holden's gagging on the doughnuts is an allusion to the forty-ninth and final koan contained in the *Mumonkan* (Ch., *Wu-men-kuan: The Gateless Gate*), the renowned medieval Chinese collection assembled in 1228 by Master Mumon Eikai (Wu-men Hui-k'ai). The koan is entitled "Amban's Addition" because a lay student, so-named, later attached it to Mumon's original edition of forty-eight. In it Amban gives a mock portrayal of himself as seeking revenge on old Master Mumon for foisting those forty-eight undigestible koans on any passerby willing to swallow them. The added koan is Amban's "priceless opportunity" to give Mumon a taste of his own medicine:

Mu-mon has just published forty-eight koans and called the book *Gateless Gate*. He criticizes the old patriarchs' words and actions. I think he is very mischievous. He is like an old doughnut seller trying to catch a passerby to force his doughnuts down his mouth. The customer can neither swallow nor spit out the doughnuts, and this causes suffering. Mu-mon has annoyed everyone enough, so I think I shall add one more as a bargain. I wonder if he himself can eat this bargain. If he can, and digest it well, it will be fine, but if not, we will have to put it back into the frying pan with his forty-eight also and cook them again. Mu-mon, you eat first, before someone else does:

Buddha, according to a sutra, once said: "Stop, stop. Do not speak. The ultimate truth is not even to think."¹⁴

Undigestible doughnuts are an apt comic image for the psycho-spiritual impasse that koans are designed to produce. Unaided reason does not equip man to comprehend ("swallow") the freedom from, indeed *within*, contradiction (permanence/change, innocence/corruption, childhood/adulthood) promised by Enlightenment. He simply cannot "take it in." Unless he be driven by an intolerable suffocation to summon up from the abyss of consciousness a power equal to this Truth, he will choke on it. Perhaps instinctively sensing this, Holden backs away from the doughnuts before getting completely "stuck." But stuck he is and, at least for a while longer, stuck he will remain between child and grown-up.

Holden's doughnuts echo Amban's doughnuts, and both echo *Mu*, mentioned earlier as the koan of koans or meta-koan. As the signature koan of Rinzai Zen, *Mu* is placed first in the *Mumonkan*. Its wording is as follows:

A monk asked Joshu [a master], "Has a dog Buddha nature?"
Joshu answered, "Mu."¹⁵

This *Mu*, variously "nothing, not, nothingness, un-, is not, has not, not any,"¹⁶ is assigned by the *rosbi* (master) to most Zen novices as an object of meditation (*zazen*). Like any koan, it is not an intellectual exercise, nor does it have any "correct" answer or interpretation. Any answer, verbal or non-verbal, presented by student to master is correct that demonstrates the former's clear intuitive grasp of the main issue: nothing (no thing) is real, all is emptiness; and hence, by virtue of the *coincidentia oppositorum* portended by the Middle Way of the koan, everything is real, all is fullness. Net result: *Mu* is absolute Freedom, ineffable Mystery, ground zero Truth. Hence its traditional representation in Japanese ink-brush calligraphy as a thick doughnut-shaped cipher. (We noted above *Mu*'s similar characterization by Hakuun Yasutani as a half-swallowed "red-hot iron ball that you cannot disgorge despite your every effort.") Doughnut or iron ball, *Mu* is what nearly chokes Holden.

Salinger's most likely source for the doughnut interlude is Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps's 1934 edition of *The Gateless Gate*, published by John Murray in Los Angeles. This likelihood is increased by the compilers' inclusion of Amban's "49th koan," in contrast to its omission by "purist" editors of most other English translations. Salinger is also linked to Reps by Alsen (160, n. 21-22), who cites another Reps collection, *101 Zen Stories* (1939), as a probable source for the Zen motifs in *Nine Stories* and "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters." The point of emphasis here, of course, is that Salinger was

already interpolating specific elements of Zen lore into the creative process as early as *Catcher*.

Rilke's Carrousel and Holden's Enlightenment

It has been shown that the aim of a koan is, by dint of its logical absurdity, to frustrate the binary either/or structure of ordinary consciousness; in Western terms, to straitjacket the conventional rationalist Aristotelian viewpoint so that something akin to the mystical Platonic can break through. This is why so many koan and anecdotes in the ancient collections feature the imagery of impasse: a monk hanging from a lofty branch by his teeth, or facing the master's bamboo stick no matter what he says or does, or being challenged to take one step forward from atop a 100-foot flagpole. The more oppressive the dilemma, the more favorable the conditions for inner revolution. Clearly the damned-either-way gallows humor of Zen appealed strongly to Salinger's sense of irony. The missing ducks, the half-frozen pond and the gagging doughnuts are intended, as symbolic echoes of classical Zen situations, to lend an aura of both gravity and, in Balzac's sense, comedy to the situation of a youth mired deep in crisis. The novel is all about Holden's weekend at the crossroads. As the reader approaches the climactic scene at the carrousel, the question verily burns: what will Holden *do*? Similarly, the old Zen masters often put this nakedly terrifying question to their spiritual charges for whom they had just devised some intolerable bind.

What Holden does in fact "do" at the carrousel is resolve his life koan. His subsequent "illness" and therapeutic confinement in no way cast doubt on this. Zen literature is replete with accounts of Enlightenment experiences (*kensho* or *satori*) that are so shattering to the individual's conditioned world view that the rush of emancipation they bring is initially experienced as a kind of nervous breakdown. Kapleau reports the case of one Zen student, a Japanese business executive, who, in his own words, one night

. . . abruptly awakened. At first my mind was foggy. . . . Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly: "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! . . ."

My son told me later he thought I had gone mad. (216)

What one might call Holden's Divine Madness commences with his sudden announcement of his decision to "go home," made to Phoebe at the carrousel: "'Yeah,' I said. I meant it too. I wasn't lying to her. I really did go home afterwards" (212). Perhaps here too Salinger had in mind Suzuki, who

describes Enlightenment in lapsarian-mythical terms as the return of conscious will to its "own original abode where there was yet no dualism, and therefore peace prevailed. This longing for the home, however, cannot be satisfied without a long, hard, trying experience. For the thing [consciousness] once divided in two cannot be restored to its former unity until some struggle is gone through with" (*Essays* 131).

However that may be, there can be little doubt of the Zen reference contained in the rain that then begins to fall, as Holden says, "[i]n *buckets*" (212; Salinger's emphasis). Holden's cliché is an "inside" Zen allusion to this shattering or explosive quality that often ushers in an Enlightenment experience. The bucket or pail or barrel that has its bottom smashed through, thus releasing the flow of water heretofore "confined," is a traditional Rinzai metaphor for the aspirant's longed-for breakthrough to spiritual freedom. The image may have its origins in the biography of the medieval Japanese master Bassui by his student Myodo who describes the moment of the former's Enlightenment as a feeling of having "lost his life root, like a barrel whose bottom had been smashed open" (qtd. in Kapleau 166). However, Salinger's source for the image is more likely to have been an anecdote in Senzaki and Reys's *101 Zen Stories* recounting the sudden awakening of the nun Chiyono, who "one moonlit night . . . was carrying water in an old pail bound with bamboo. The bamboo broke and the bottom fell out of the pail, and at that moment Chiyono was set free!" (Reps 31). Of course, in narrating the climactic event of Holden's spiritual breakthrough, Salinger works some deft displacements on the image to avoid obviousness: the water does not rush out through bottomless buckets, rather it is the buckets (of rain) themselves that come pouring down. Similarly, the analogous onrush of tears expressive of the aspirant's emancipation that usually accompanies the bucket image (Myodo says of Bassui that the tears overflowed, "pouring down his face like rain" [qtd. in Kapleau 166]) is truncated in Holden's case to: "I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth" (213).

However, what is truly arresting about Salinger's rendering of *Catcher's* denouement is the particular way he uses the German poet Rilke's *Dinggedicht*, "Das Karussell" (1908), to say the unsayable, that is, to convey through oblique symbolic allusion the essence of Holden's solution to his life koan. Salinger's veneration of Rilke is well known.¹⁷ Rilke is one of very few poets mentioned by name in the fiction.¹⁸ Also, some preliminary scholarship has been done showing influence,¹⁹ but no one has as yet nearly done justice to the profound connection between Rilke's and Salinger's carousels.

Both poem and novel are about the loss of innocence marking the passage from childhood to maturity. This, as noted above, is precisely the issue (koan) at the root of Holden's crisis: "How can I possibly move on to a world teeming with phonies [change] without becoming one myself [permanence]?",

as it were. The reference to “Das Karussell” as a reflection of the miraculous solution at long last welling up in Holden is contained in the blue coat worn by Phoebe as she rides the carrousel. Giddy with delight, Holden exclaims, “I felt so damn happy, . . . I don’t know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all” (213). Blue-clad Phoebe alludes to the “kleines, blaues Mädchen” [“little girl in blue”]²⁰ who rides the stag in Rilke’s lyric and stands for innocence, that is, the child’s capacity for complete absorption in the moment of play. In counterpoint, the older girls in “Karussell” riding nearby already have, like Holden, one foot in adulthood and thus are afflicted, as is he, with that relentless self-consciousness that breeds phoniness, the bane of Holden’s existence: “. . . Mädchen, helle, diesem Pferdesprunge/fast schon entwachsen; mitten in dem Schwunge/schauen sie auf, irgendwohin, herüber—” [“. . . girls, so fair, having all but outgrown such play; in mid-ride they look up, at something, over this way—”] (Rilke 228). These girls on Rilke’s carrousel, one a child, the others no longer quite, dramatized for Salinger the collision of world views that bedevils Holden.

The solution to any koan is some realization of a dialectical synthesis that shifts the aspirant to a phase of consciousness deeper and more comprehensive than the logico-rational, one that can effortlessly accommodate both terms of the conflict. This realization must be more than intellectual (in fact, intellect need hardly be involved at all); it must have the immediacy of an insight grounded in experience and must take one well beyond the pairs of opposites that are forever dogging the human mind. In Rilke’s poem this is subtly indicated in the line, “Und manchesmal ein Lächeln, hergewendet” [“And now and then a wide grin turned this way”] (Rilke 228).²¹ The wide grin is that of some child on the carrousel; it is “hergewendet” [“turned this way”], that is, toward the poet-persona. Poet and child, for a flickering instant locked in each other’s gaze. What else can this be but the realization of the *coincidentia oppositorum*? The poet is the one who is somehow able to grow up while yet remaining a child. As Rilke says elsewhere, in response to an imaginary interlocutor, the poet is gifted with the ability to behold all things, good and bad, genuine and phoney, with the celebratory eyes of a newborn: “Oh sage, Dichter . . . / Woher dein Recht, in jeglichem Kostüme, / in j eder Maske wahr zu sein?/—Ich rühme” [“So tell me, poet . . . / Wherefore thy right to be in any mask, in any costume true?/—I celebrate”] (Rilke 230). Indeed, just like a new-born, the poet beholds things by *becoming* them. As Keats has it: “The poet has no self; he is forever filling some other body.” This I take to be Salinger’s understanding of Rilke’s “Das Karussell,” and it is this understanding, rather viscerally than intellectually experienced, that now overcomes Holden like an ancient dream fulfilled, releasing him from his long bondage to a worn-out world view.

To be sure, Holden is no poet in the conventional sense, but I believe Salinger takes “poet” in this deeper archetypal sense shaped by the German-Romantic tradition to which Rilke was heir and which he in fact fulfilled: the poet represents the cutting edge of human spiritual evolution, one who has, at least once, been struck by lightning, one who has made, however tentatively, the quantum leap from human to cosmic consciousness. This notion of the poet as spiritual archetype also seems to be what Franny is trying to convey to her boyfriend as she struggles to justify her dislike of the self-styled poets in the English Department:

I mean they're not *real* poets. They're just people that write poems that get published and anthologized all over the place, but they're not *poets*.²²

The archetype of the poet as (wo)man-child, as a seamless sacerdotal identity of opposites, and therefore as the solution to Holden's koan, is also hinted at in Holden's repeated references at the carrousel to “old Phoebe,” the child who incarnates the wisdom of the ages.

In Salinger's multi-veiled allusion to this Rilkean meeting of eyes, this interlocking glance, it is not only man and child, or experience and innocence, that fuse in Holden's at last emancipated spirit, but also, as it were in miniature, the great Wisdom traditions of East and West. For Holden's character, suddenly becoming in this apocalyptic moment more than itself, is a syncretic expression of their mutual recognition of the universal mystical truth of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. In Zen, the recognition of this truth lies at the heart of any koan; in Rilke, its expression reflects a perennial German spiritual insight the lineage of which can be traced back at least as far as Meister Eckhart's “Single Eye” by which man and God view each other.²³ It is Salinger's particular genius in this climactic scene to have brought these great mystical traditions together in the simple, homey tableau of an older brother happily watching his kid sister as she takes a turn on the local merry-go-round. One need hardly point out that all of this is punctuated, so to speak, by the image of the carrousel itself as a mandala-symbol of the dynamic Eye of Wisdom to which the path of Holden Everyyouth inevitably leads.

A final question suggests itself. The Zen masters tell us that to have solved one koan is, at least for a time, to have solved them all, since every koan, upon solution, vouchsafes a glimpse of the “same” Absolute. If, as is argued here, Holden has accomplished this, if, for the duration of his cheerful repose on that park bench (and doubtless well beyond), he basks in the glow of Enlightenment, then why does Salinger have him end his story on a note of lack or deficit, as if he were still ensnared by what Buddhists call *avidya*, that is, the primal Ignorance that gives rise to desire: “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" (214)?

Oddly, the question answers itself when taken paradoxically, that is, when one reads "missing" in the paradoxical context of Enlightenment, wherein all contradictions are resolved, as *itself* a form, even the supreme form, of "having." C. S. Lewis, no mean adept in spiritual matters, makes this point most eloquently in his autobiographical description of the state of "Joy," i.e., Enlightenment considered in its affective aspect. Recalling his experience of a walk during which this sense of Joy had been especially acute, he reflects

. . . what I had felt on the walk had also been desire, and only possession in so far as that kind of desire is itself desirable, is the fullest possession we can know on earth; or rather, because the very nature of Joy makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting. There, to have is to want and to want is to have.²⁴

For Holden at this moment, to miss is to have—fully. As for his missing "even . . . that goddam Maurice" (214), it is another curious fact of Enlightenment that, viewed through Its eyes, all things assume an aura of infinite value, however noble or base they may rank on the valuative scales of ordinary consciousness. Suzuki goes so far as to say:

But with the realization of Enlightenment, the whole affair [i.e., life] changes its aspect, and the order instituted by Ignorance is reversed from top to bottom. What was negative is now positive, and what was positive now negative. Buddhist scholars ought not to forget this revaluation of ideas that comes along with Enlightenment. (*Essays* 139)

To all appearances, Holden Caulfield is neither a poet nor a Buddhist scholar. Yet he is, by novel's end, an intimate of the Truth both stammer to convey.

Conclusion

Indications are that Salinger's interest in Zen slowly waned in the course of the 1950's as he turned to other Eastern religions and to Christianity for inspiration. In fact, the gradient of this waning interest can be traced in terms of the kind of narrative treatment given the Zen motif from *Catcher* (1950) through *Nine Stories* (1953) to "Zooney" (1957) and "Seymour: An Introduction" (1959). Generally speaking, the movement is from implicit to explicit, or from subtext to text. In *Catcher*, Zen has a clear but strictly covert presence.

It is there *as symbolic* echo and oblique allusion, imbuing the “banal” tale of a modern adolescent’s identity crisis with the power and gravity of ancient legend. Its use is, in a word, aesthetic—the more so in view of its subtle but profound resonance, as we have seen, with a spiritually akin yet culturally remote literary echo from the German poet Rilke. In *Nine Stories*, Zen still serves a quasi aesthetic function (e.g., Seymour’s semi-implicit banana-fish koan, or Teddy’s eccentric “emptying-out” theory of education, a transparent reference to the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*), but the one-hand-clapping koan that prefixes the book signals the emergence of Zen as more an intellectual than a creative issue for Salinger. This is precisely its status in “Zoocy,” where it is lavishly entertained in the probing religious dialogue of brother and sister, and in “Seymour: An Introduction,” which features a longish peroration on Zen given by Buddy near its end. As the author’s religious enthusiasms shift away from Zen, Zen becomes in the fiction something that has always been anathema to the masters—a subject of discussion.

Of course, Salinger is not to be faulted for this. Passions wax and wane, interests come and go, for artists no less than mere mortals. An artist’s only duty is to follow his daimon wherever it may lead. The matter of waning interest is raised here only as an attempt to account for the peculiar failure of previous critics to identify specific elements of Zen in *Catcher*. The announced presence of Zen in the later fiction seems to have lulled most of them into the assumption that it has little or no presence in *Catcher*. Ironically, just the opposite is the case: the presence of the East in *Catcher* is all the stronger precisely for its being unannounced, not to mention covertly commingled with the strains of the poet from the West. Salinger himself recognized this gradual slackening of his ability to make creative use, not only of Zen, but of religion generally, in his work. He fretted over the question whether he really was following his daimon. Hamilton tells us that Salinger, in an unpublished letter to his friend and confidant, Learned Hand, written in the late 1950’s, “admits he is well aware that his new [post-Zen] religious preoccupations might turn out to be harmful to his writing, and that he sometimes wishes he could go back to his old methods. But it seemed to him that there was little he could do about controlling the direction of his work” (154). In contrast to Holden who arrives at Enlightenment at the end of a painful inner struggle, Holden’s author seems to have been blessed with a touch of Enlightenment at the beginning, only to have it calcify with the passing years into something not unlike those glass-encased exhibits in his masterly novel.

NOTES

1. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951; Boston: Little, Brown, 1991) 13; hereafter referenced parenthetically in text by page number.

2. Thus the epigraph to *Nine Stories* (1953; Boston: Little, Brown, 1991) quoting the well-known koan of Rinzai master Hakuin: “We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?,” and the occasional detailed discussions of Zen philosophy in “Zoocy” (1957) and “Seymour: An Introduction” (1959). Eberhard Alsen, *Salinger’s Glass Stories as a Composite Novel* (New York: Whitston, 1983) 158–159, lists some nine scholars who, during the years 1957–1971, took up the Zen theme in these post-*Catcher* works. I would add Tom Davis, “The Sound of One Hand Clapping,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 4 (1963): 41–47; and Sidney Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International, 1965) 219–234. Also, by way of updating the list: Thomas Edwin Brinkley, “J. D. Salinger: A Study of His Eclecticism—Zoocy as Existential Zen Therapist,” diss., Ohio State University, 1976; James Lundquist, *J. D. Salinger* (New York: Ungar, 1979); Katsuhiko Takeda, “Uchi naru Zen v.s. Soto naru Zen,” *J. D. Salinger Bungaku no Kenkyu*, ed. Hisashi Shigeo and Ayako Sato (Tokyo: Tokyo Shirakawa Shoin, 1983); and Yasuhiro Tae, “Between Suicide and Enlightenment,” *Kyushu American Literature* 26 (1985): 21–27.

3. E.g., Bernice and Sanford Goldstein, “Zen and Salinger,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 12 (1966): 313–324 and “Some Zen References in Salinger,” *Literature East and West* 15 (1971): 83–95; Gerald Rosen, *Zen in the Art of J. D. Salinger*, Modern Authors Monograph Series 3 (Berkeley: Creative Arts, 1977) throughout; and Lundquist 52–53, 70–74.

4. Lundquist (69–114) views *Nine Stories* as a synthesis of Zen aesthetic principles and the art of the short story.

5. John Skow, “Sonny: An Introduction,” *Time* 15 Sept. 1961: 84–90.

6. For more on the compositional chronology of *Catcher*, see Ian Hamilton, *In Search of J. D. Salinger* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 113–116. See also p. 267 above.

7. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)* (1949; New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1961) 240.

8. A few commentators have read the ducks as reflecting, in one way or another, Holden’s preoccupation with the problems of change (hence, also death) and permanence: e.g., James F. Light, “Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*,” *Explicator* 18 (1960): item 59; Lundquist (40); Rosen (23); and John M. Howell, “Salinger in the Wasteland,” *Critical Essays on Salinger’s “The Catcher in the Rye.”* ed. Joel Salzbarg (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990) 85–42. No one, however, has heretofore recognized the Zen source of the episode.

9. Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice and Enlightenment*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 12.

10. Hakuun Yasurani, as qtd. in Kapleau (76).

11. This according to Donna Slawsky, currently reference librarian for HarperCollins, in a telephone interview with the present author on Oct. 27, 1995.

12. According to Hamilton (126–127), in 1953 Salinger gave a Zen booklist to writer-friend Leila Hadley.

13. As Alsen (130) points out, it is Suzuki’s *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, in its 1950 Rider edition, from which Salinger quotes that religion’s Four Great Vows in “Zoocy.” Moreover, Alsen includes the *Essays* as among those works used by Salinger in forming “the basis of Seymour’s eclectic religious philosophy” (257–258) in the Glass stories.

14. Paul Reps, ed., *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, n.d.) 128.

15. Katsuki Sekida, ed., *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977) 27.

16. *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, trans. Michael K. Kohn, ed. Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, et al. (Boston: Shambhala, 1991).

17. See Hamilton (108); also, and esp., Edward Stone, "Salinger's Carrousel," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (1967–1968): 521.

18. There is an allusion to the fourth of Rilke's "Duino Elegies" in "Franny." See *Franny and Zooey* (1961; Boston: Little, Brown, 1991) 6.

19. For a comparison of the two carrouseles, see Stone (520–523), with whose judgment that "Salinger took the [carrousel] ride itself not for its meaning but merely as a point of departure" (523) I beg to differ. For the Rilke-Salinger connection in the broader sense, see Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958).

20. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Das Karussell," *German Literature since Goethe*, ed. Ernst Feise and Harry Steinbauer, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958–1959) 2: 228. Translations of Rilke's German are my own.

21. It is interesting to note that, although Rilke was probably not acquainted with Zen, he did have an avid interest in neighboring spiritual practices, such as Hindu yoga, as pathways to expanded consciousness (see Carossa, "Begegnung mit Rilke," *German Literature since Goethe* 2: 330–337). His early *Dinggedichte*, including "Das Karussell," are well known as creative products of some sort of intense sustained contemplation or meditation.

22. *Franny and Zooey* 18. Similarly, the German-Romantic view of the poet as spiritual adept in essence and wordsmith only by accident or convention characterizes Buddy's "rehabilitation" of his brother Seymour's image: ". . . not one Goddamn person . . . 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." See *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963; Boston: Little, Brown, 1991) 60.

23. The line from Eckhart down to Rilke would include, among others, the "Philosophical Eye" or "Mirror of Wisdom" of the great Baroque mystic Jacob Böhme and the flower-calyx-eye symbolism of such mystically inclined Romantic poets as Novalis and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Contemporary to Rilke is, of course, the archetypal psychology of Carl Jung for whom the Eye signifies the ideal Self that is to be realized, or at least approached, through the psycho-spiritual process of individuation.

24. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest-Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955) 166.

25. The problem of sustaining the creative tension of the dialectic between paradigmatic poles that may be termed variously implicit/explicit, subtextual/textual or aesthetic/intellectual (as here), immediate/mediate or sudden/gradual (the Zen Enlightenment paradigm), or, in Jacques Derrida's recent parlance, poetic/rabbinical, without allowing oneself to be pulled too closely to the one pole or the other, is, of course, inescapable, not only for Salinger but for anyone taking a serious interest in Zen, or, for that matter, in the free-flowing quality of consciousness typically associated with creative expression of any kind. Zen has always construed itself as the realization of "immediate experience." Questions from students that engage discriminative thought (e.g., "What is the highest principle of Buddhism?") are usually roundly rebuffed by masters, particularly in the Rinzaï tradition, with

a shout (“Kwatz!”), a clout or a nonsensical expletive. Yet even the most sincere intention or effort to “experience immediately” only lands one back in shallow intellectual modeling. The question for us as beings blessed with / condemned to self-reflection is: how can we possibly have immediate experience without, at the same time, suppressing its intellectualization; or, conversely, allowing such intellectualization to occur as it will, how can we “preserve” the immediacy of the experience? This paradox constitutes a koan every bit as challenging as Holden’s. (It is, in fact, a variant of it.) One might call it the author’s koan and be inclined to judge that Salinger, with his gradual “Fall” into Zen intellectualism, dealt with it rather less successfully than did his protagonist with his. For a most thoughtful reflection on this paradox in terms of the complex relationship that obtains between the writer—be he scholar or novelist—and the religio-cultural tradition about which he writes, see Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).