

## **Digression, Ethical Work, and Salinger's Postmodern Turn**

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Many contributors to *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature's* 1963 special issue on J.D. Salinger found themselves dealing with the sticky fact that his writing after *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) had grown increasingly unconventional and, for numerous readers, off-putting. In the lead essay, for example, Ihab Hassan focused on “certain peculiarities of form in these stories, a form that is so asymmetrical, so tolerant of chance and digression, as to warrant the name of antiform” (5). Salinger's asymmetries and digressions were of interest to Hassan because they exemplified a “new conception of form, particularly suitable to their vision, which is becoming rife in current literature” (6). Although today any critical attention paid to Salinger is centered almost exclusively on *The Catcher in the Rye*, it is worth asking how his later work could be representative of a new antiform becoming “rife” in American literature. This later work is indeed significant because its digressive sensibility can be read as a response to the influence of New Critical attitudes toward narrative fiction, which held that to be successful, fiction must exhibit a unity (“The sense of wholeness or oneness”) which digression would disrupt (Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Fiction* 608).<sup>1</sup> Salinger's aesthetic, on the other hand, emphasized that far from being a rhetorical device that merely distracts from the main point of the work, digression could be significant in and of itself. In fact, insofar as his highly digressive work disrupts the sense of unity described by the New Criticism, it encourages readers to re-evaluate how they assign meaning and significance in and for the work, a task that amounts to what I will term ethical work. In its interest in antiform more broadly and digression specifically, Salinger's later work, dismissed though it has been by those critics working from New Critical standards of evaluation, actually anticipates the postmodern turn of the later 1960s and beyond. This essay first describes a New Critical

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context that emphasizes the importance of formal unity, and then demonstrates how Salinger's later work, repudiating such notions of unity, develops an aesthetics of digression that encourages ethical work. From there, the essay looks at two exemplars of high postmodernism, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, to argue both that the postmodern turn was occasioned by an interest in digression, and that this interest does not merely amount to autotelic narcissism as is sometimes claimed, but rather to ethical (and, in Pynchon's case, political) interventions in the ways that real life is represented through fictional narrative.

### THE WHOLE PROBLEM OF UNITY

As a pedagogical project, the New Criticism was enormously influential in arguing that literature has special characteristics which other forms of discourse do not. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, work by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and others focused on the complex formal characteristics of select texts (mainly poetry "in the tradition"). But it was in 1938, when Brooks and Warren published *Understanding Poetry*, a college textbook that codified the spirit of this work and packaged it in a form understandable to students, that the New Criticism began to take a serious hold in the American academy.<sup>2</sup> As Mark Jancovich has put it, *Understanding Poetry*, together with a companion volume *Understanding Fiction* (1943), "revolutionized the teaching of English in America . . . [by seeking] to train students to identify the constitutive features of literature, or 'literariness'" (86–87). One result of this revolution was that only certain types of work came to be seen as literary insofar as they yielded the formal characteristics that Brooks and Warren tended to emphasize—features such as paradox, irony, and structural unity.<sup>3</sup> This last feature in particular was of special importance to Brooks and Warren when trying to distinguish literary fiction from other sorts of fiction. In *Understanding Poetry*, they demonstrated how it was possible to explicate a poem line by line to tease out the subtleties of irony or paradox. But in *Understanding Fiction*, the authors found themselves explaining in more general terms why, as they write in the introductory Letter to the Teacher, "A piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful" (*U* xvii).

The notion that "successful" fiction must not only possess but must in some sense be a unity is emphasized as the writers argue that a good story depends on "something in the nature of the story as story—on whether the motivation is acceptable, on how characters are related to the plot, on the degree of plausibility in incidents . . . in other words [a good over a bad story] depends on the *form* . . . of the story—in terms of a total meaning" (*U* 107–8). In the second edition, Brooks and Warren expanded this section to underscore that the "total meaning" they have in mind is connected to

unity: “When we say ‘a novel,’ ‘a story,’ or ‘a plot,’ we instinctively imply the idea of a unity. We imply that the parts, the various individual events, hang together. This is a matter of cause and effect. In any story we expect to find one thing bringing on another. If we can detect no reasonable connection between them, if there is no ‘logic’ whatever, we lose interest” (*Understanding Fiction 2nd Ed.* 80). It is not so much that a work must “hang together” in some way, but rather that it must hang together in the particular ways that Brooks and Warren find especially “reasonable” or interesting—thus, for example, there must be an appropriate “key event,” “climax,” and “complication.” The question of how or whether the parts hang together is what they call “the whole problem of *unity*”; glossing Hanson Baldwin’s “R.M.S. *Titanic*,” they write: “As a rule, in most pieces of fiction, there is a central character, but there are instances in which this is not true. In such cases, however, the fiction writer is not freed from the obligation to maintain a unity, that is, to build his story so that the characters in action are related to each other and to a dominating idea or theme” (*U* 25). The language here is telling: although Brooks and Warren earlier insist that “a literary dictator has no place in the republic of letters” (*U* xiv), they nonetheless write in terms of rules and obligations; in *Understanding Fiction*, for a work to be considered good or worthwhile or interesting, it must exhibit the kind of unity they describe. Other sorts of fiction, while potentially entertaining, are not accorded the same status.<sup>4</sup>

Given such insistence on formal unity, it might make intuitive sense that digression, and especially sustained digression, could be seen as a symptom of problematic narrative fiction. In a later book on Faulkner, for example, Brooks writes of *A Fable* (1954) that “*in spite* of its subplots and digressions, the novel steadily gravitates toward the scene” that resolves the novel’s “main plot [*italics mine*]” (*William Faulkner* 237).<sup>5</sup> From the point of view of one reading for the novel’s formal unity, digressions in *A Fable* are blemishes because they distract from the novel’s “main plot,” which means that Brooks must dismiss these aspects in order to show how the novel hangs together. Like Brooks, the few mid-century critics who wrote on digression tended to argue that in any literary work worth its salt, what appears at first blush digressive is actually revealed through close reading to be integral to the larger progressive plot of the work. Writing, for example, about one of the most digressive novels of them all, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, one critic seemed eager to fit the digressive parts into the novel’s unity by attempting to prove “Tristram’s artistic control even over his digressions” (Piper 65).<sup>6</sup> Although it may require a New Critical arsenal to argue that *Tristram Shandy*’s digressions are evidence of a larger control which unifies the work, it is certainly possible to do so. The consequence, however, is that such an argument negates one function of digression, to swerve away from this unity. In 1959, John Satterfield made a similar argument about a book that was coming to be seen as the Ur-novel of American literature, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

(1851). Satterfield concludes: "If this reasoning has any basis in fact, the frequently made charge of disorganized, digressive construction in *Moby-Dick* should be mitigated" (107).<sup>7</sup> Satterfield's language is suggestive: he presumes digression is something a work can be *charged* with (a rhetorical misdemeanor, perhaps?). By showing how, with proper analysis, *Moby-Dick's* digressive structure can be "mitigated," Satterfield in effect argues that digressions as such cannot exist in Melville's novel—his logic aims to convert digression into its opposite, the necessary, the essential, the progressive.<sup>8</sup>

Satterfield's defense of *Moby-Dick* against the charge of digressiveness implies a value judgment: Melville's novel is somehow better if one can read its digressions not as digressions but as positive contributions to the plot. But this defense ignores some fundamental questions: What is meant by digression? Why is it better to not be digressive? Can digressions ever be significant in and of themselves? Exploring such questions will help us see not only why critics like Satterfield were so interested in mitigating digression, but also why, in contrast, an increasing number of writers were at this time drawn to testing the uses and limits of digression.

## DOING THINGS WITH DIGRESSION

One entry point into these questions is *The Catcher in the Rye*, which offers a glimpse of the kind of ethical digression that Salinger develops more fully in his later writing. Musing about his failure in school, Holden Caulfield explains why he flunked his Oral Expression course: "It's this course where each boy in class has to get up in class and make a speech. You know. Spontaneous and all. And if the boy digresses at all, you're supposed to yell 'Digression!' at him as fast as you can. It just about drove me crazy" (238). When pressed by Mr. Antolini about why he didn't like yelling "Digression!" at his classmates, Holden himself digresses into a story about Richard Kinsella, who was tasked with giving a speech about his father's farm:

[the students] kept yelling "Digression!" at him the whole time he was making it, and this teacher, Mr. Vinson, gave him an *F* on it because he hadn't told what kind of animals and vegetables and stuff grew on the farm and all. What he did was, Richard Kinsella, he'd *start* telling you all about that stuff—then all of a sudden he'd start telling you about this letter his mother got from his uncle, and how his uncle got polio and all when he was forty-two years old, and how he wouldn't let anybody come to see him in the hospital because he didn't want anybody to see him with a brace on. It didn't have much to do with the farm—I admit it—but it was *nice*. It's nice when somebody tells you about their uncle. Especially when they start out telling you about their father's farm and then all of a sudden get more interested in their uncle. I mean it's dirty to keep yelling "Digression!" at him when he's all nice and excited. (239)

For Holden, Richard's digression is "nice" because it attends to significant, though technically extraneous, details (the mental and physical health of his uncle) rather than focusing on conventional, though relatively insignificant, details (the varieties of fruits and vegetables grown on the farm). Richard fails the assignment because Mr. Vinson demands, in the spirit of the New Criticism, that his students "*unify and simplify all the time*" (240), a requirement that represents Salinger's distillation of a work like *Understanding Fiction*. Holden, on the other hand, advocates disrupting unity if it means elaborating a sensitive, empathetic recognition of another human being.

In such enthusiasm for digression, Holden's most obvious literary ancestor is Tristram Shandy himself, whose frequent and lengthy digressions have made it difficult for generations of readers to identify the plot of *Tristram Shandy*. Early in that novel, Tristram announces a digressive sensibility akin to Holden's: "Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading,—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them" (64). Taken together, Tristram's and Holden's ideas about digression suggest that readers reconceptualize what they deem significant when engaging a fictional narrative—if digressions are the very "soul of reading," then surely they ought not be dismissed as merely distracting or obviously irrelevant. Yet readers have tended to think of them as rhetorical devices that merely swerve from the real point of a narrative, rather than things to be taken seriously in and of themselves. This assumption has led to a relative lack of theorization about digression, a situation that Ross Chambers has tried to address by conceptualizing a "poetics of digression" (85).<sup>9</sup> Like Chambers, I take digression seriously, but I do so by locating an ethical undercurrent in the notion that it can be "nice" or soulful. To follow Tristram in elevating the importance of digressions, as Holden does, is to stray from the ways that novels or teachers of Oral Expression have conventionally encouraged readers to assign significance. In a critical moment marked by the ascendancy of the New Criticism, these conventional ways of assigning significance were manifest in concepts like unity so that a New Critic might dismiss a digressive work as flawed; some writers, by contrast, found digression energizing partly because it violated the staid norms of good or worthwhile fiction. A highly digressive work—in which it is not clear what is digressive and what is not—thus implies a relationship between ethics and interpretation as readers are continually revising their conceptions of what is meant to be taken as significant, a kind of sorting that has the capacity to encourage ethical work.

To understand narrative fiction marked by digression and how it might be connected to ethical work, one needs first to pause over the terms "digression" and "significance." Here is a definition of digression from Suzanne Keen's recent *Narrative Form*: "A digression, a term borrowed from rhetoric, is an interpolated story or anecdote, which appears to have been

inserted into a narrative in order to lead away from the main plot, albeit temporarily" (80). In such standard conceptions, digressions announce themselves as distinct from what is most significant in a narrative. Yet, as Keen's canny use of *appears* implies, they are also significant in this very announcement: although they imply a hierarchy of significance (the "main plot" is significant, and what swerves from it is not) their disruption of this hierarchy is itself a significant function. In highly digressive narratives, digressions do not occur only temporarily—if they swerve away from the "main plot," the narrative itself confuses and questions this plot so that a putative digression may in fact be more sustained than the principal progressive plot, if there is one. As Keen writes of *Tristram Shandy*, such narratives try to "make an art out of the digression, at the expense of plot."

For Peter Brooks (borrowing from the Roland Barthes of *S/Z*), "significance" results from the play of various codes: "Plot, then, might best be thought of as an 'overcoding' of the proairetic by the hermeneutic, the latter structuring the discrete elements of the former into larger interpretive wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance" (18). In other words, the plot consists of events and actions (the proairetic), which make the "questions and answers that structure a story" (the hermeneutic) knowable. When readers are tasked with determining what is significant—a task made particularly arduous by highly digressive narratives—we might say that they look for those details that assist in what Brooks calls "the revelation of meaning that occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full prediction" (*Ibid.*). In *S/Z*, Brooks goes on to explain, "The text is seen as a texture or weaving of codes . . . which the reader organizes and sorts out only in provisional ways, since he never can master it completely, indeed is himself in part 'undone' in his efforts to unravel the text" (18–19). Highly digressive narratives foreground the reader's provisional sorting, and even if we believe that a text's meaning is never fully exhausted, the act of sorting and organizing can be ethical work if it involves determinations about one character's significance relative to another's.

Indeed, highly digressive narratives can encourage ethical work precisely because what Keen calls the "main plot" may not be so clear; readers are left to establish a hierarchy of significance for themselves, a task related to ethics because it involves deciding who matters. Martha Nussbaum has suggested that there is a connection between style and ethics, and reminds us that, historically, readers have gone to philosophy and dramatic poetry for much the same reasons, to see "how human beings should live" (15). For Nussbaum, a signal feature of poetry (and, she demonstrates, literature more broadly) is the way in which this inquiry is framed, and she urges critics to "take style seriously in its expressive and statement-making functions" (8). Otherwise put, in addition to the ways a particular character may either exhibit or fail to exhibit virtue in a given story, a hallmark of literature is that the way it is told, its style, can also promote ethical awareness in the reader.<sup>10</sup>

A highly digressive style disrupts a reader's sense of what she thinks she knows—the main plot is most significant—which causes her to revise her understanding of what is or is not important, relevant, worthwhile, a value judgment that amounts, as I have said, to ethical work. The Aristotelian conception of ethics from which Nussbaum is working emphasizes the development of virtuous character; highly digressive narratives encourage such development as readers adjust their ideas about who or what is significant. Since in these narratives, what counts as the “main plot” is itself vexed, the experience of reading them is the experience of realizing that certain aspects not immediately relevant to this plot may nonetheless be significant *as digressions*, a realization that can be a model for ethical behavior (as happens, for example, when Richard Kinsella demonstrates that his uncle merits more attention than crops, a recognition Holden would call ethically meritorious).<sup>11</sup>

These claims can be illustrated first by looking at Salinger's work of the late 1950s and early 1960s—work in which the critical reception reflects the aversion that many readers had toward digressive writing. In 1955, Clifton Fadiman—a critic so indefatigable that he estimated he had read “five or ten thousand books” during his career—remarked that “Our times do not encourage the literature of digression” (306, 36). As if to repudiate Fadiman's claim, in that same year Salinger's writing had begun a stylistic turn another critic characterized as “digression so pervading that it assumes the nature of form” (Lyons 66).

### HOW DIGRESION RUINED SALINGER

As many American readers know, Salinger was cheered by critics throughout the fifties on the strength of *The Catcher in the Rye* and a handful of well-made stories published in *The New Yorker*. By the end of the decade, however—after he published *Zooey* (1957) and *Seymour—An Introduction* (1959), both of which are highly digressive—professional critics and amateur readers alike found themselves puzzled and generally unreceptive to Salinger's project.<sup>12</sup> This was due in part to his apparently excessive, self-conscious, self-critical, and self-commenting style. Digression, in other words, had ruined Salinger. Compare, for example, two very different assessments of his achievement, one focused on his earlier work, one on his later work. Writing for *Life* magazine in 1961, Ernest Havemann's opinion was that Salinger's “stories, when he finishes writing . . . are as tight at violin strings. Every phrase, every word is right. He is perhaps the greatest word-weaver in American literary history” (21–22). By 1997, when it was rumored that Salinger's last published piece, “Hapworth 16, 1924” (1965) was to be issued in book form, Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* dismissed such later work as “shapeless” and “Hapworth” as “a nearly impenetrable narrative,

filled with digressions, narcissistic asides and ridiculous shaggy-dog circumlocutions." Both accounts are representative: early Salinger, critical darling of the 1950s, could hardly be praised enough; but later Salinger, the recluse who turned his attention exclusively on the Glass family, was summarily dismissed as self-indulgent and boring.<sup>13</sup> What's annoying for a reader like Kakutani is that Salinger's style has lost its economy—the digressions and "narcissistic asides" that flourish in stories like *Seymour* and "Hapworth" have become the point, and this point is not worthwhile.

The history of Salinger criticism—at least of his later work—is thus the history of critics coming to terms with the digressive style that Hassan labeled "antiform." Now, in the twenty-first century, the legacy of postmodernism encourages us to see antiform as form; I would urge us to wonder whether Salinger's writing did not have a hand in such recalibration. After *Nine Stories* (1953), all of Salinger's published work concerned the Glass family—mainly the seven children who by 1959 had grown up to be everything from an "ex-roving Carthusian monk-reporter" to a "solvent Westchester matron" (S 115). But Salinger's chief preoccupation has always been Seymour Glass, the eldest of the children and subject of the first Glass story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948), in which Seymour proved himself one of the more famous literary suicides in recent memory. The subsequent Glass stories that have yet been published (I write this after Salinger's death, and it is as yet unclear whether other work will see print) concern themselves in one way or another with this towering intellect (Columbia professor at age 19) and religious mystic (seer into past and future lives). As these stories move deeper into the Glass family mythology, their formal structure grows less conventional, so earlier works—"Bananafish," "Down at the Dinghy" (1949), "Franny" (1955)—are tightly constructed stories, while later ones—*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1955), *Zooey* (1957), *Seymour—An Introduction* (1959), and "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965) are baggier and more difficult to categorize, even generically. Even in *Raise High*, the story that pivots from the earlier to later works, Salinger experiments with a more leisurely prose style and a willingness to digress; with *Zooey* the loose form is more memorable than the story; and in *Seymour* and "Hapworth" there is little in the way of conventional plot.<sup>14</sup>

The narrator of these stories is Buddy Glass, the second-eldest and Salinger's authorial alter-ego (we learn in *Seymour* that Buddy has "really" written *The Catcher in the Rye*, "Teddy," "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*—or at least works that look quite like them) (113–15, 176).<sup>15</sup> In *Seymour*, Buddy is writing about his brother—not a story per se, but a free-form Introduction. The title itself declares the work's resistance to linear progression: the dash in the page heading announces that this is not a conventional story, but rather a series of "undetached prefatory remarks" (S 107) that reminds one of an academic essay more than a story. Once we push into the narrative itself, however,



we see that it is far from a scholarly account of Seymour's life and works. Although the "Seymour" of the title's first half is the trumpeted subject, the "Introduction" of the second half occupies an unusual amount of space—the act of writing, in other words, becomes the story. From the start, the narrator, Buddy, the person doing the introducing, takes over the narrative—we're not reading a story about Seymour, but rather a story about the process of writing about Seymour. We learn about Buddy's mood, his motivations for writing about Seymour, his likes, dislikes, phobias, and so on. When Buddy digresses, Salinger has made him do so not only because Seymour is a formidable topic to write about (for Buddy), but also because writing itself is a powerful place where one can rehearse an argument about engaging the world (for Salinger). Such an undertaking can become so digressive that it led William Wiegand, writing for *The New Republic* in 1959, to see *Seymour* as a descendant of *Tristram Shandy*: "His syntax is sophisticated and lucid, . . . he proposes his objectives and makes his digressions . . . with an aplomb like Sterne's, whose techniques those of 'Seymour' perhaps most resemble" (111). Writing on the occasion of Salinger's death, David Lodge once again drew a comparison between *Seymour* and *Tristram Shandy* to claim that Salinger's later work "challenged conventional notions of fiction and conventional ways of reading as radically as the kind of novels that would later be called post-modernist, and a lot of critics didn't 'get it.'"

### SEYMOUR AGAINST SELECTION

If the aspect of *Seymour—An Introduction* that has engendered the most vocal critique is its lack of plot, it is because the narrator actively resists, as Lodge reminds readers, conventional formal structures, what Buddy dismisses as "that old Chekhov-baiting noise Somerset Maugham calls a Beginning, a Middle, and an End" (*S* 212). The allusions here suggest that in his explicit resistance to formal niceties like unity, Buddy is at once thinking anxiously about his influences and demonstrating an interest in narrative innovation. There are numerous moments in *Seymour* when Buddy gets tangled in what teachers of composition call "metadiscourse"—he tends to comment on his own writing, and many of the putative digressions are about the ability of narrative to characterize a subject. Statements like this are typical: "If I push for Selectiveness with a description, I'll quit cold again before I start. I can't sort out, can't clerk with this man [Seymour]. I can hope that *some* things will be bound to get done here with passing sensibility, but let me not screen every damned sentence, for once in my life, or I'm through again" (*S* 162). It is easy to read such moments as self-involved and boring (and many critics have), but they also offer insight into Salinger's narrative project in the New Critical context earlier described.<sup>16</sup>

In *Understanding Fiction*, Brooks and Warren make much of the idea of “selection”—that is, an author’s ability to choose what is or is not significant in the telling of a given story:

In discussing the previous topics, we have several times referred to *selection*. But this principle applies not only to exposition and description; it applies with equal force to plot structure. The individual items in the chain of events which presumably the character of a story would participate, in real life, during the span of time covered by the story, are not of equal significance; in fact, a writer does not try to follow, in most cases, an unbroken chronicle of events, but omits from the story itself many possible events, meals, casual meetings, routine occupations, and the like. He selects the events which have meaning, and meaning in terms of the basic impulse of the story, not simply in isolation or in relation to some idea not involved in the story. Even among the events which are actually to appear in the story, the writer exercises discriminations of emphasis and subordination. He selects a certain event to serve as the key to his whole plot sequence. Other events lead to, and sometimes lead away from, such a key event, but among these other events there is also operating a process of selection in terms of emphasis and subordination, for these other events are not all at the same level of importance. (*U* 576)<sup>17</sup>

In this formulation, selection is clearly linked to the sense of significance already discussed. For Brooks and Warren, the “plot structure” must develop so that certain events are accorded more significance—and therefore more “meaning”—whereas others are subject to subordination. Works in which the principle of selection has not been properly exercised violate the ideal of unity because it is difficult or impossible to tell what is relevant and what is not. In this sense, Buddy sees himself as writing against those critics who would insist on the careful selection of details, on not digressing at the expense of the main plot. Buddy wants to write about the life of his brother, but he does so by refusing to choose narrative details that have “meaning in terms of the basic impulse of the story” since the impulse is in the details themselves.

In contrast to Brooks and Warren, then, Buddy thinks he prioritizes people over plot structure and other demands of the story; as he writes in the opening section: “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” (*S* 107). Like all narrators, Buddy wants to describe what is important to him—and he does so out of personal interest—but he finds it disingenuous to press such description into the molds of plots or the tyrannies of Beginnings, Middles, and Ends. It is more honest for him to proceed with a form that seems formless.

Buddy explains the strangeness of his form in the opening pages; addressing the reader directly, he writes: “please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-blooming parentheses: ((( ( )))”). I suppose, most unflorally, I truly mean them to be taken, first off, as bowlegged—buckle-legged—omens of my state of mind and body at this writing” (S 98). The typographical novelty has made this one of the most quoted lines from *Seymour*, but I suggest it is important because it points to the ethical work sustained digression can encourage. The metaphor of parentheses blooming throughout *Seymour* is fitting because Buddy’s digressive style allows him to include aspects of life outside the “main plot”—pertaining to Seymour, to himself, and to otherwise peripheral characters—in his *Introduction*, aspects that would necessarily be excised were Buddy composing a plot committed to, say, Aristotelian unity.

Buddy finds this digressive style particularly apt for introducing his brother because it allows him to create a narrative that reflects Seymour’s perspective on the world. According to Buddy, Seymour “look[ed] for God, and apparently with enormous success, in the queerest imaginable places—e.g., in radio announcers, in newspapers, in taxicabs with crooked meters, literally everywhere” (S 108). Seymour’s engagement with the world, then, mirrors the structural logic of a highly digressive narrative: it confounds expectations about what matters and what does not by plumbing peripheries for significance. Ultimately Seymour invests great, deific importance in those aspects of life that may seem at first as unimportant or distracting as a digression.

This capacity to appreciate the significant, yet generally unnoticed, aspects of life characterizes Seymour’s poetry. Buddy offers a paraphrase of one striking poem:

One of Seymour’s hundred and eighty-four poems—a shocker on the first impact only; on the second, as heartening a paean to the living as I’ve read—is about a distinguished old ascetic on his deathbed, surrounded by chanting priests and disciples, who lies straining to hear what the washerwoman in the courtyard is saying about his neighbor’s laundry. The old gentleman, Seymour makes it clear, is faintly wishing the priests would keep their voices down a bit. (S 140–41)

This poem is a “paean to the living” because it confuses centers and peripheries: the literal center—the circle of chanting disciples—is rendered less significant than the seemingly throwaway remarks about laundry. Buddy wants this poem to make an impression on the reader because it illustrates Seymour’s ethics: he is prepared to locate significance “everywhere,” an act that positions him to better appreciate what ethicists of various stripes call the Other (Hale, “Fiction as Restriction” 189–91).

Seymour’s appreciation for the overlooked presents an ethical crisis for Buddy-the-writer because it forces him to struggle with creating a narrative

style that does what Seymour did in real life. In fact, if we want to insist that there is a plot to *Seymour—An Introduction*, it is Buddy's own progress as a writer and human being: he is learning to use his writing to be more ethically aware. In the opening sections of the work, Buddy represents himself as a misanthropic crank who resents having to teach literature at a small college where all the readers are poor ones. He suffers from "a pathological spasm . . . that causes an off-duty classroom lecturer to double up and hurriedly cross streets or crawl under large pieces of furniture when he sees anyone under forty approaching" (S 143). By his own account, then, Buddy's initial behavior contrasts to that of the ascetic in Seymour's poem. But by the end of *Seymour*, Buddy has changed his mind, and he says of the students in his class: "They may shine with the misinformation of the ages, but they shine" (S 213). What has happened? Why the change of heart?

Buddy suggests that his change in perspective has come from describing his brother. Significantly, it is not only Seymour's personal example that moves Buddy—although it certainly does move him—but also the act of writing about him. The process of narrating jars Buddy into appreciating his students. At the end of *Seymour*, he writes:

I have an impulse . . . to say something mildly caustic about the twenty-four young ladies . . . who will be waiting for me in Room 307, but I can't finish writing a description of Seymour—even a bad description, even one where my ego, my perpetual lust to share top billing with him, is all over the place—without being conscious of the good, the real. This is too grand to be said (so I'm just the man to say it), but I can't be my brother's brother for nothing, and I know—not always, but I *know*—there is no single thing I do that is more important than going into that awful Room 307. There isn't one girl in there . . . who is not as much my sister as Boo Boo or Franny. (S 212–13)

For Buddy, the act of narrating is therapeutic because it leads him to "the good, the real." In this case, "the good" is tied directly to ethical behavior: rather than dismissing his students as irrelevant, he invests them with significance so that nothing is "more important" than engaging them. Such awareness of the good comes only from "writing a description of Seymour"—a narrative that is, as we have seen, characterized by its digressiveness. This narrative style allows Buddy to end by using Seymour's insight to appreciate his students rather than by only describing Seymour himself. Buddy has, in other words, not only elevated Seymour's significance, but has also come to value those he has ignored or resisted. Thus the resolution of the narrative, if there is one, consists of Buddy's applying Seymour's insight (a washerwoman's remarks are significant, too) to his own life (his lackluster students deserve recognition, too). Writing, and especially writing in a style digressive enough to let him chase thematic connections and ramble about seemingly-pointless details, has made Buddy more ethical.

## LEARNING TO WANDER WITH OEDIPA MAAS

Not only has the ethical undercurrent of highly digressive narratives like *Seymour* remained ignored, in Salinger's case, this form itself was largely responsible for the diminishment of his critical reputation. And yet, ironically, the sort of fiction that began to interest the American academy in the 1960s and later was often characterized by digression and by unconventional narrative structures. Standard accounts of literary postmodernism stress its experimental nature and formal innovation; such an interest implies new conceptions of how digression can function, which in turn sets the stage for the ethical work digression can encourage.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to think of a writer more firmly ensconced in the (still-developing) postwar canon than Thomas Pynchon, whose early work bears the marks of Salinger's influence: his 1964 *Saturday Evening Post* story, "The Secret Integration," is about a precocious child, a "boy genius with flaws" reminiscent of Seymour Glass (Pynchon, *Slow Learner* 142). But more relevant than this early attention to children is how Pynchon's digressions are sometimes tied to ethical work in a rebuke of the perceived New Critical norms that Salinger likewise resists. In Salinger, digression affords a personal ethical stance so that Buddy learns to acknowledge his fellow human beings; Pynchon uses digression to emphasize the political dimension to this stance, so that readers come to an awareness of those populations who have been written out of traditional histories and who have little say in conventional political structures.

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for example, is typical of Pynchon's well-known paranoid style, which would seem to suggest that there is no such thing as digression because everything is connected, whether we first apprehend this or not. In a rollicking dramatization of the ways that history may or may not be a web of connections, Pynchon has protagonist Oedipa Maas stumble upon evidence of a vast conspiracy, called Tristero, that stretches back hundreds of years and over various countries. The plot of *Lot 49* concerns Oedipa's following up these clues and seeking out people who may have some knowledge of Tristero (it turns out that by the end Oedipa may have indeed unearthed a conspiracy, she may be imagining the connections, or she may be the victim of an elaborate practical joke). However one chooses to read the novel, what seems significant to the plot are those moments when more clues are revealed and Oedipa fits them into a kind of coherent pattern.

As she navigates varied indications of Tristero's existence, however, the narrative swerves into digressions from this principal progressive plot. In the middle of the novel, for instance, Oedipa learns that the Tristero are responsible for a secret postal system, and this comes to serve as a metaphor for all the disaffected people who have been left out of history and who are scarcely given a voice to communicate—in this sense, the participants in the alternative postal system are politically attuned relatives of Seymour's

washerwoman. In the lengthy fifth chapter, Oedipa begins to shed her suburban housewife mentality—marked in the novel's opening sentence by Tupperware and fondue—as she spends a hallucinatory night wandering the Bay Area. She begins this odyssey at a gay bar, which she first resolves to avoid “before recalling how she had decided to drift tonight” (89).<sup>19</sup> A discussion with someone there introduces Oedipa to a range of people who have little significance in the “main plot” of history and politics but great significance in *Lot 49*: Thich Quang Duc, the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in the streets of Saigon to protest government actions (L 92); Jesús Arrabal, member of a Mexican anarchist group (L 96–97); and even a boy who wants to communicate with dolphins, who “will succeed man” (L 99). As Oedipa wanders, she encounters a host of misfits and outcasts for whom she “played the voyeur and listener” (L 100).

To the extent that Oedipa sees (or imagines) evidence of the Tristero everywhere she turns, this chapter is connected to the principal conspiracy plot. But as she pushes later into the night, the chapter becomes increasingly digressive as it delves further into the lives of those people passed over by history—people whom Pynchon calls the “preterite” after Puritan notions of the elect versus the preterite. At one point, “Through an open doorway, on the stair leading up into the disinfectant-smelling twilight of a rooming house she saw an old man huddled, shaking with grief she couldn't hear” (L 101). Emerging slowly from her own Tupperware-like isolation, Oedipa recognizes her and the man's mutual humanity when he describes a letter for a far-off wife, and she embraces him as he cries. What becomes significant is not the man's connection to the Tristero plot, but his connection to those people made to suffer because they do not fit into the plans of the political majority. Oedipa's recognition of this suffering signals that she has performed ethical work—the “sorting” (L 95) that, like Buddy Glass and Brooks' reader, she is learning to master—made possible by the digression from her single-minded pursuit of the Tristero plot.

In the following chapter, Pynchon contrasts the digressive model of engaging the world with a New Critical methodology that was thought to bracket people in favor of text.<sup>20</sup> In a visit to Professor Emory Bortz, an authority on Richard Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, a bizarre play that deals with Tristero, Oedipa wants information on “the historical Wharfinger. Not so much the verbal one.” This request occasions sneers by the circle of drunk, self-important graduate students hanging out with Bortz in his yard:

“The historical Shakespeare,” growled one of the grad students through a full beard, uncapping another bottle. “The historical Marx. The historical Jesus.”

“He's right,” shrugged Bortz, “they're dead. What's left?”

“Words.”

“Pick some words,” said Bortz. “Them, we can talk about.” (L 124)

The professional practice of foregrounding the words on the page at the expense of historical and biographical context (Brooks ends *The Well Wrought Urn* with the dreamy sense that “the poetry must be wrested from the context . . . must be given a place of permanence among the stars” [175]) reaches comic heights in this exchange, in which Bortz and his minions refuse to discuss anything but text. The implication is that for Professor Bortz, the human encounters Oedipa has just had are irrelevant. But Pynchon’s readers, having come through Oedipa’s lengthy wanderings and meditations on the preterite, realize that these encounters are actually more significant than Wharfinger’s words. This point is emphasized by the fact that despite Bortz’s obsessive fidelity to the words on the page, these words can never be fixed, as the play’s meaning changes in the shuffle of multiple and corrupt editions, at least one of which has been suppressed by the Vatican (*L* 125–26). For Pynchon, the heart of Oedipa’s development is not her unraveling of Tristero’s textual trail, which can never be definitively explicated anyway, but rather her contact with all those disaffected and disenfranchised people who communicate through the alternative mail system. Her digression from chasing the Tristero plot makes such contact possible, and renders her less politically naive.

#### FORGETTING FREITAG

Two years after *Lot 49*, John Barth’s collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968)—whose title story is one of the most frequently anthologized examples of high postmodernism—takes the interest in digression we have seen in Salinger and Pynchon and uses it to demonstrate how aesthetic structures have ethical and political consequences. While Barth’s work has often been read as purely metafictional, art-for-art’s-sake navel-gazing, his treatment of digression actually shows that he is thinking through the ethical consequences of writing narrative fiction committed to New Critical ideals.

In the story “Lost in the Funhouse,” Barth engages the standard characteristics of well-made fiction found in a book like *Understanding Fiction*, and suggests that a digressive sensibility is actually more faithful to the experience of real life. The plot has young Ambrose Mensch and his family on vacation at the Maryland shore during World War II. The actual funhouse on the boardwalk becomes a multi-function metaphor: it stands for the confusion of adolescence, or for the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood, or for writing and its relationship to real life. The story is a handy textbook illustration of high postmodernism because Ambrose digresses often to reflect on the act of writing, so the narrative draws much attention to the conventions of story-telling—conventions that are presumably violated by the very act of pointing them out. The end of the story comes not when Ambrose does or does not achieve resolution to a particular conflict, but

rather when he has discovered “a way to get through the funhouse”—when he has navigated the reflections of distorted mirrors that are meant to reflect the nature of narrative (Barth, *Lost* 92). Near the end of the story, the narrator questions the fitness of Freitag’s Triangle, “in which *AB* represents the exposition, *B* the introduction of conflict, *BC* the ‘rising action,’ complication, or development of the conflict, *C* the climax, or turn of the action, *CD* the dénouement, or resolution of the conflict” (Barth, *Lost* 91). Although the mock-academic prose that explains “the action of conventional dramatic narrative” is a digression from the story of Ambrose’s trip to the shore, it is a good indication of what Barth is so often interested in with his writing (and what many postmodern narratives are about): how stories get told.

Just as *Seymour’s* resistance to the constraints of the Beginning, Middle, and End allow him to behave ethically and *Lot 49’s* digressive sensibility exposes Oedipa to those left behind the march of history, “Lost in the Funhouse” argues that the use of digression can better articulate the messy complexities of life: “A long time ago we [readers and writers] should have passed the apex of Freitag’s Triangle and made brief work of the dénouement; the plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires” (92). For Barth, digression represents an aesthetic form that encompasses the meaning of real life, rather than the meaning of a literary object. To put it in the terms used earlier: digression resists “literariness” because it evades unity, but in so doing becomes more relevant to real life experience, which is not unified in the same way as “successful” narrative fiction. Barth in fact thought enough of digression’s power to repudiate New Critical norms that he called his next work, *Chimera* (1972), a “three-part digression” that represents “The Deterioration of the Literary Unit” (157). Such deterioration can encourage ethical work since it allows Barth, as he puts it in *Chimera*, to avoid a plot that rises “and fall[s] in meaningful stages” in favor of a structure that “winds upon itself like a whelk-shell or the snakes on Hermes’s caduceus: digresses, retreats, hesitates, groans from its utter et cetera, collapses, dies”—a winding that invites readers to think reflexively about their own sorting and meaning-making.<sup>21</sup>

As these brief examples from Pynchon and Barth suggest, one enduring characteristic of the postmodern turn is a propensity for digression.<sup>22</sup> Even though this propensity was looked upon unfavorably in the 1950s and early 1960s by those evaluating literary texts with a New Critical framework, noting the extensive use of sustained digression in Salinger’s later work helps us see him and high postmodern writers as more ethically engaged than their detractors sometimes admit. Far from being simply an example of the postmodern sensibility’s metafictional self-absorption, highly digressive narratives, and the ethical work they can encourage, suggest that new conceptions of form carry with them fresh ways of engaging real-world problems. From an act so fundamental as Buddy Glass’s recognizing the humanity of his students to one so profound as Oedipa Maas’s registering



the existence of whole subcultures of the politically disenfranchised, digression can help readers used to certain literary structures notice that works of fiction—like political and historical narratives—are ordered in ways that favor some people while subordinating others. Salinger's later work is especially suggestive in this regard as its digressive flights of fancy ask readers to recalibrate the ways they assign significance and meaning in their own lives.

## NOTES

1. For citation purposes, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Fiction* (1943) will hereafter be referred to as "*U*."

2. For more on the history of New Criticism, see John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (London, 1978); Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge, 1993); and Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville, 1996). Seminal New Critical statements include John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT, 1941) and Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947).

3. Writing about the influence of Brooks in particular, Art Berman suggests: "The critical terms 'paradox' and 'irony' achieved such prominent status in the critical lexicon of American writers on poetry in the 1950s and even into the 1960s that much explication of the time may seem, looking back, the insertion of the same critical key into every poetical lock" (52).

4. This idea is likewise emphasized in another textbook, *An Approach to Literature*, by Cleanth Brooks, John Purser and Robert Penn Warren, which distinguishes literature from real life by suggesting that literature is a "unit": "Our plot, or action, differs, then, from the random piece of life seen from the train window—from what critics sometimes call a 'mere slice of life'—by being a unit. . . . It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. That is, we begin at a point where we can pick up all the pertinent facts, and we end at a point where we feel that something has been accomplished with those facts" (11).

5. Faulkner's digressions, lengthy though they may be, do not mean that we ought to call his work postmodern, since there is an identifiable progressive plot from which such digressions swerve.

6. For a more recent discussion of digression in *Tristram Shandy*, see Pat Rogers, "Ziggerzagger Shandy: Sterne and the Aesthetics of the Crooked Line," *English* 42.173 (1993): 97–107.

7. With respect to digression and Melville in particular, critical opinion has changed greatly; see, for instance, John Evelev, "'Every One to His Trade': *Mardi*, Literary Form, and Professional Ideology," *American Literature* 75.2 (2003): 305–33.

8. Cousin to arguments like Piper's and Satterfield's is the frequently made claim that an author's use of language must be proportional to the worthiness of his or her point. See, for example, Alfred Kazin's well-known critique of Faulkner's style: "Faulkner's perpetual need for some verbal splendor, a merely illustrative richness, always suggests some self-fascinated energy, not the moving intensity of a writer who throws the weight of his body in each word; and it is not strange that his most magnificent effects should so often seem pointless" (463).

9. See also Anne Cotterill, *Digressive Voices in Early Modern Literature* (Oxford, 2004); and John Lennard, *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Oxford, 1991).

10. I am thus assuming, with Nussbaum, James Phelan, Wayne C. Booth, Adam Zachary Newton, and others that, as Phelan puts it, "literature in general and narrative in particular, through their attention to the concrete particularities of human situations and their capacity to engage our emotions, provide an especially rich arena for the exploration of ethical issues" (21). See also: Wayne C Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethic of Fiction* (Berkeley, 1988); and Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, 1995). For a critique of Nussbaum, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham's article entitled "The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum," where he argues that in much of her work "literature itself, which Nussbaum represents as the very voice of particularity and contingency, is flattened out into a category with a single moral value: good" (61).

11. Derek Attridge offers a different view of digression that helps articulate how it might function to create ethical work. The occasion for his remarks is what happened when Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* was condensed by Anthony Burgess into the *Shorter Finnegans Wake*. If nothing else, the *Wake* is a book which does not depend on an easily identifiable linear plot, yet as Attridge points out, Burgess's undertaking is predicated on the idea that certain aspects of the novel are inessential—digressive—whereas others are not. For Attridge, the trouble with Burgess's approach is the assumption that some parts of the *Wake* are less significant than others. Attridge argues that in attempting to pare the novel, Burgess misses the point, for it is "a book without a center; which is to say that it is a book without digressions, without anything that can be skipped, taken in at a glance, or read rapidly to get the gist" (217). As Attridge remarks, too much meaning is lost in Burgess's "filleting" of *Finnegans Wake*, and "the 'backbone' he offers is a matter of moral as well as structural fiber" (214). Although he does not follow through its implications, to me Attridge's use of "moral" is suggestive, for it implies another sort of value that gets exercised when one labels aspects of a text "digressive": a digressive work may suffer at the hands of a reader eager to excise and dismiss. Attridge's discussion of *The Shorter Finnegans Wake*, then, affirms the ways that digression carries with it the notion of value, as it invites readers to sort out what is significant from what may be excised or skipped without any real loss to the main plot.

12. For a description of this turn, see Janet Malcolm, "Justice to J.D. Salinger," *The New York Review of Books*, 21 June 2001.

13. Although it is true that in the fifties Salinger enjoyed widespread critical praise, he did have some notable detractors; see, for example, George Steiner, "The Salinger Industry," in *Studies in J.D. Salinger*, ed. Marvin Laser and Norman Fruman (New York, 1963), 113–18; and Mary McCarthy, "J.D. Salinger's Closed Circuit," in *The Writing on the Wall* (Boston, 1962), 35–41.

14. A decade before even *The Catcher in the Rye*, one finds a glimmer of *Seymour's* narrative sensibility in an odd story Salinger published in *Esquire*. "The Heart of a Broken Story" is a Shandian account of attempting to tell a conventional "boy-meets-girl" story. Salinger begins with a conventional opening paragraph, then digresses: "That was the beginning of the story I started to write for *Collier's*. I was going to write a lovely tender boy-meets-girl story. What could be finer, I thought. The world needs boy-meets-girl stories. But to write one, unfortunately, the writer must go about the business of having the boy meet the girl. I couldn't do it with this one. Not and have it make sense" (32). In the narrative that follows, Salinger explains the reasons why such a conventional form would not "make sense" in this case, and instead offers a series of alternative plots.

15. For citation purposes, Salinger's *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour—An Introduction* will hereafter be referred to as "S."

16. Writing on the influence Salinger has had on John Updike, Donald Greiner suggests that part of the trouble with works like *Seymour* is their preachiness: "Where Salinger lectures and even bullies, Updike muses and invites" (123).

17. See also *An Approach to Literature*: "It is probable that, if [one] is a serious writer, he will . . . try to reconstruct for himself as completely as possible the lives of the people involved [in the story] . . . He must select certain things that will serve to convey the story and will also serve the purpose of making the reader imaginatively aware of things that are not told" (17).

18. See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York, 1987), 106–7; and Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York, 1980), 52–53.

19. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* will hereafter be abbreviated to "L."

20. Taking Frank Lentricchia and others to task, Janovich suggests that the denial of historical context "is part of the legacy of the New Criticism, it is the result of a misrepresentation of the New Criticism and the way in which it defined literary activity" (4).

21. John Barth, *Chimera*, 196. Later in the work, he also elaborates on a discussion of Freitag's Triangle (250–252), which he will pick up again in his next novel, *LETTERS* (Dalkey, 1979), page 146. For more on the "literary unit," see James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *LBJ* 88 (1969). Beth Boehm has suggested that such techniques have potential "redemptive power": Barth's "self-referential language does return to the reader a certain power over linguistic structures by emphasizing the 'man-madness' of those structures . . . Rather than despairing at the multiple meanings of words and structures made from them, readers are encouraged to celebrate their ability to decipher and find meaning in these man-made structures" (115–16).

22. For other examples of how digression is linked to the postmodern turn, see Ihab Hassan's own *Paracriticisms* (1975), an important early explanation of literary postmodernism, which appropriates a digressive style to describe what's new in contemporary fiction. Or the 1980 special number of *Sub-Stance*

devoted to contemporary American fiction, which opened with a piece by Ronald Sukenick called “Endless Short Story: The Finnegian Digression.” By placing Sukenick’s work as the “frontispiece” to a statement about contemporary American fiction, the editors of *Sub-Stance* announced an explicit interest in how the conventions of narrative were being rethought—an interest that, for Sukenick at least, seemed best articulated through digression. See also Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (Carbondale, 1985), in which he dismisses New Critical norms in favor of a digressive sensibility. In 1974, avant-garde playwright and director Richard Foreman’s “Ontological-Hysterical” manifestos included an “Ethical Digression” whose goal is “to evoke ever-subtler resources of perceptual discrimination” (139).

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