

Finding the Form

Notes Towards a Poetics of Youth Literature

I've been involved with literature and the young all of my career, which extends to fifty years now. During that time, my understanding of what I call 'youth literature' has evolved.

I use the term 'youth literature' because 'teenage' limits us to the ages between 13 and 19 and is disliked by young people. 'Adolescence' has an abstract, clinical overtone and, according to the psychologist Erik Erikson, covers the period between 13 and 17 and so presents the same age problem as 'teenage'. Best, then, to avoid the word. The Americans use the term 'young adult' but it has never been comfortably accepted in Europe and in any case is used by some authorities for the ages between about 13 and about 30.

Which leaves us with 'youth', which the United Nations General Assembly classifies as the ages between 15 to 24. Advertising companies work to the same definition. The World Bank adds a year, from 15 to 25. The British Commonwealth Youth Programme works with 15 to 29 year olds.

At the beginning I thought it was literature *for* the young – by which I meant written for a known audience, taking into account whatever limitations and preferences of language, form and subject were generally supposed to be appropriate for that readership. In the 1950s and 60s my primary occupation was as a

teacher of teenagers who were not academically gifted, many of whom read very little. So my view of youth literature was shaped by concern for them. For fifteen years I read with their eyes, searched for fiction they would read with desire and pleasure, and wrote and edited books produced *for* them.

After a while, this seemed inadequate. It implied that all young people are the same, whereas quite obviously they are not. They are as various as adults. So I began to talk about books written *on behalf of* young people, by which I meant literature that was on the side of youth, was empathetic with their point of view, their concerns, and their ways of life. A literature written *for* them only in the sense that they were not able to write it for themselves. There seemed nothing wrong with this. After all, most adults cannot write the literature they read for themselves, which can therefore be said to be written on their behalf.

But again after a while, this seemed insufficient, because it's still a reader-focused way of thought. The English novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch divided writers into 'journalists' and 'serious writers.' The French critic Roland Barthes made the same distinction. I prefer to adopt his French etymology of the English words 'writers' and 'authors.'

Writers shape what they write to suit a known audience. This doesn't apply only to newspapers, magazines and information. Most fiction is written like that.

Authors, on the other hand, are not concerned with the reader. At least, not while they are composing their books. Their intention is to produce a work of art. Which is to say, they are only interested in making an object called a poem or a novel, a short story, or any of the other kinds of composition we call

literature.

This evolution in my thinking occurred in the mid 1970s when I found myself writing a novel that was not driven by a desire to write *for* teenagers. I was not writing to please a readership, known or unknown. Nor was I writing on anyone's behalf. Even more important, I was certainly not engaged in an act of self-expression. I knew only that I was writing out of an urgent need to create a novel, with-out reference to anyone else, not even to myself.

The resulting novel, published in 1978, is called *Breaktime*. The central characters are teenagers, and the point of view and main concerns are those of youth. But because it wasn't *for*, and wasn't *on behalf of* young readers, the only expression I could find that made any sense was to say it was a novel *of* youth.

While writing *Breaktime* I came across Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*, which gave me the intellectual tools to clarify in critical terms what had happened. Unconsciously I'd shifted from writing for a known readership to writing for 'the reader in the book.' In *Breaktime* the reader in the book is manifested as Morgan, a character in the story, the friend of Ditto, the story's protagonist and first-person focalising narrator. Ditto writes for Morgan.

But that wasn't all. Iser gave me the concept of 'the author in the book,' sometimes expressed as the author's second self. In this construction, the author in the book and the reader in the book are as much characters as any of the characters in the story.

A novel written in that manner is a closed world, an object like a sculpture. It stands as an actuality in the world, just as David stands as an actuality in the Accademia museum in Florence. At the same time it is not of the flesh-and-blood world, and exists only as its immutable self in our everyday messy changing world, but is not of it. It is a coherent, separate, stable, unchanging entity, that can be destroyed or corroded, shut away or ignored, but, if preserved intact and left untampered, is always what it is, and yet is always in process of being interpreted and reinterpreted by flesh-and-blood readers.

Just as, after *Breaktime*, I had to work out what I was doing, so now, after finishing in 2005 the six novels in the sequence that began with *Breaktime*, I find myself asking: What *is* youth literature? Is it a form in its own right, or is it merely a genre? Does it have any identifiable existence at all? In other words, is there a poetics of youth literature? And if there is, what is it?

These are the questions I'm trying to contemplate. The emerging book is currently called *The Age Between: A Poetics of Youth Literature*, which has a subtitle: *A Critical Memoir*.

Let me explain.

No book, no system of thought starts from nothing. All books, all systems of thought, have their antecedents. Or, if you like, they are based on exemplary models. Mine has two. One is the model for my book's form. The other underpins my thinking.

The book's form is inspired by Viktor Shklovky's masterpiece, *Energy of Delusion*. Shklovsky was one of the founders of

Russian Formalism. But like all great critical thinkers, he was not confined by any one system of thought. He took ten years to write *Energy of Delusion*, his last book, completed in 1981, when he was 88, three years before his death. It mixes literary theory with biography and autobiography. It is an innovative critical study of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Pushkin, as well as a personal memoir of Shklovsky's life-long journey as a reader, thinker and writer. It eschews jargon, employs technical language only when absolutely essential, is informally personal and witty in tone, and reads like a novel. It defies the confines of critical form while discussing the form of the novel.

I am 75 – exactly the age of Shklovsky when he started his exemplary book – and am setting out on a similar study of youth literature. I tremble at my presumption in even hoping I can produce anything that approaches Viktor Shklovsky's great work.

The second source, which underpins my thinking about the ethical, moral and philosophical aspects of literature, is not one book but a few of the many written by the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, in particular *Oneself as Another*, and the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*.

Of course, such an enterprise requires a constant tussle with fundamentals. For example, what do we mean by 'youth' or its usual synonym, 'adolescence'? What do we mean by 'literature'? Indeed, what do we mean by 'poetics'?

Then there is the list of topics to be tackled, which include social and cultural history, recognition, liminality, narrative paradigms, evocriticism, deformation, identity, catastrophe and renovation, phenomenology, reception theory, and others ranging

from ethical aims and moral modes to care, love, attention, and the aporias of the soul, with plenty more in between.

So much for the background. What follows are sample sections of an early draft of one chapter.

*

To help make a start on a poetics of the form, there are examples of youth literature which have a useful feature that separates them from all other examples. They are books written by authors in their teenage years and which are generally regarded as literary classics. They include Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au Corps* (*The Devil in the Flesh*), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Mathilde*, Anne Frank's *Diary*, S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*. Because they are written by teenagers, I wondered if they might evidence the basic DNA of youth fiction – or, to change the metaphor, provide a blueprint of a truly youth fiction.

There are also examples of novels about teenagers written by authors long after their youth, which are also regarded as classic. The most obvious of these is J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.

As an example of work in progress, I'll pair *Bonjour Tristesse* and *The Catcher in the Rye* in a critical reading focused on their handling of youth, and of narrative, to see if there are noticeable differences as well as similarities.

The Catcher in the Rye was published in the U.S.A. on 16 July 1951.

Its author, Jerome David Salinger, was thirty-two.

He had worked on his novel for ten years, elaborating it from a short story, 'Slight Rebellion off Madison.'

Famously reclusive and antagonistic toward inter-viewers, he was not always so retiring. In 1953 he told a high-school newspaper that *Catcher* was 'sort of' auto-biographical. 'My boyhood,' he said, 'was very much the same as that of the boy in the book' (quoted in Blamey, 4).

Though not an immediate runaway success, it became a long-time bestseller after teenagers adopted it as 'theirs.'

I'm pretty sure that nowadays *Catcher* would be published in the American market as a 'Young Adult' novel.

I have no idea if Françoise Quoirez had read Salinger's book, though I doubt it, when at the age of eighteen she wrote *Bonjour Tristesse* and took Sagan as her pseudonym after the character Princesse de Sagan in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Published in France in 1954, *Bonjour Tristesse* received instant international praise from critics and bestseller status with readers.

These two celebrated novels were produced in the early 1950s, before the emergence of the modern phenomenon of 'youth culture,' the beginnings of which most people associate with the 1960s, but which has its cultural and sociological roots much earlier.

However, it could be argued that both books caused surges in that development, and in particular in the production, mainly at that time in America, of an identifiable literature published with 'young adults' as the primary readership.

Do they help us to construct a poetics of the form?

Holden and Salinger

In his recent book *On the Origin of Stories* Brian Boyd comments that

Academic literary criticism tends to focus on meaning, on the *themes* of traditional critics or the *ideologies* of more recent ones. But works of art need to attract and arouse audiences before they ‘mean.’ Every detail of a work will affect the moment-by-moment attention it receives . . . Yet criticism has tended to underplay the ‘mere’ ability to arouse and hold attention (232).

How did *Catcher* arouse and hold the attention of the young? (I use the past tense because I’m not sure it has that power now.)

Ian Hamilton, a British critic and poet, gives us a first-hand account in his book *In Search of J.D.Salinger*.

He read *Catcher* in the 1950s when he was seventeen. It exercised such a permanent hold on him that late in his career he tried to honour his debt by writing a biography of Salinger.

I first heard about *Catcher* when I was a twenty-three year old English teacher in my first job and Penguin Books published the first paperback edition.

The Headmaster of my all-boys grammar school banned it, claiming its influence would be deleterious.

Of course, as always happens when a book is banned, everyone wanted to read it.

The boys told me you had to read it because everyone was talking about it and you didn’t want to be left out. In other words it was one of those books mainly of interest because they supply

peer-group social cement, a topic for gossip and the taking of sides.

I mention this because in Britain at any rate the book didn't catch on with the young until the Penguin paper-back was published in 1958.

At that time paperback books were not accepted by either the education or the library establishments. Schools and public libraries didn't buy them.

As well as underplaying the ability of a book to arouse and hold attention, academic criticism often ignores the often unconscious effect the book *as a physical object* has on readers, attracting their attention and influencing the meaning they make of the text.

It seems to me that *Catcher's* popular success depended a lot on its appearance in paperback, which by the mid 1950s was the form preferred by teenagers.

In his book about Salinger Ian Hamilton records how

for many months after reading *The Catcher* at the age of seventeen, I went around being Holden Caulfield. I carried his book everywhere with me as a kind of talisman. It seemed to me funnier, more touching, and more *right* about the way things were than anything else I'd ever read. I would persuade prospective friends, especially girls, to read it as a test: If they didn't like it, didn't 'get' it, they were out. But if they did, then somehow a foundation seemed to have been laid: Here was someone I could 'really talk to' . . . *Catcher's* colloquial balancing act is not just something boldly headlined on page one: It is wonderfully sustained from first to last. And so too, it seemed to me, was

everything else in the book: its humour, its pathos, and, above all, its wisdom, the certainty of its worldview. Holden Caulfield *knew* the difference between the phony and the true . . . *The Catcher* was the book that taught me what I ought already to have known: that literature can speak *for* you, not just to you. It seemed to me ‘my book.’ (5)

Literature can speak *for* you, not just to you.

And because in such books youth readers find themselves identified not only as individuals but as individuals belonging to a community, they often regard them as specifically and categorically theirs. Pop music is another example of this.

Hamilton’s experience could be called an epiphany. A showing forth. A re-cognition.

By which I mean: Coming to know consciously some-thing that you didn’t know you already knew. The know-ledge being that ‘I am,’ and ‘I am not alone’.

I’ve long argued that until you encounter in stories a self that’s recognisably yours within a culturally defined group of people to whom you feel you belong, you do not believe you exist or, at the least, you believe you are subservient to a dominant group who do possess an identifying body of stories – a literature.

I thought this because of my own history as a child of the unliterary, indeed almost illiterate, English working class. But reinforced by others, such as some British-born black youngsters telling me in the early seventies that they felt themselves to be ‘outsiders’ in Britain, a second-class people, because there were no stories about them written by people like them.

Also, it is my personal experience and my professional experience as a teacher, that until you find yourself in printed literature you do not become a committed literary reader. You may read the prescribed texts at school, you may talk and write about them well enough to pass exams, but you do not read to live, and literature will always be peripheral, if present at all, in your daily life, and your sense of who and what you are.

If this is the case, a central feature of youth literature would be its purpose in describing and identifying youthness.

I am not suggesting that it is *only* in adolescence that people find their epiphany. But I do suggest that it occurs more usually in adolescence than at any other time.

Nor am I suggesting that it is *only* in youth literature that you can find your epiphany. On the contrary. No one can predict the book that will provide an epiphany for someone else.

But if we pursue only this line of phenomenological, reader-reception inquiry, giving predominance to the reader's experience regardless of the text, we end up judging youth fiction as nothing other than a sociological or educational matter, rather than as an *authorised* literary form – an art in its own right, with its peculiar poetics.

Many academics in literary faculties do argue that books produced for the young, whatever their authors' intentions, are merely sociological or educational in nature, and that there is no such thing as 'youth literature.'

As an author of such fictions I challenge that view. It is because of my experience as a writer of them that I'm attempting to find a poetics that determines their nature as art.

Hamilton tells us that Holden spoke *for* him, that he '*knew* the

difference between the phony and the true,’ and that ‘wonderfully sustained’ throughout the book was ‘above all, its wisdom.’

What is this wisdom? What is it that Holden *knows*?

‘Phony’ is one of Holden’s favourite words. I take him to mean hypocritical, pretentious, insincere, fake.

Every adult he mentions he calls phony.

Phoniness is not the preserve of adults, however. Just about everyone of Holden’s own age, in school or out, is tainted.

(Did Holden ever ask himself whether he might be phony as well? There’s no sign of such self-inquiry.)

Who isn’t phony?

Only his twelve-year-old sister, Phoebe. And some ‘kids’ about her age who Holden comes across now and then during his wanderings in New York City.

‘Kids’ – who seem to be people below the age of thirteen – are mostly ‘nice and polite.’ And are not phony.

In Chapter 22, what Holden cares about and the significance of the book’s title are made explicit. Holden sneaks into his parents’ house at night to be with Phoebe. Towards the end of this long scene Holden says, ‘You know what I’d like to be? I mean if I had my goddam choice?’ And tells her:

‘You know that song “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye”? I’d like –’

‘It’s “If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye”!’ old Phoebe said . . .

‘I thought it was “If a body catch a body,”’ I said. ‘Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around – nobody big, I mean – except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I

have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be.' (179-180)

Holden's Freudian slip – 'catch' for 'meet' – is revealing. What he 'really wants' is to live in a Never-Never-Land peopled only by 'innocent' children, except for himself, the only 'big person,' who would be their guardian, their 'catcher' – in other words, their keeper and saviour.

Adults are phony, or negligent (like Holden's parents).

Pre-pubescent children are honest and true.

Therefore, the best thing, the thing to want, is never to grow up.

This is the 'wisdom' Ian Hamilton so much admired.

Peter Pan and Michael Jackson come to mind.

You might say this is typical of adolescence. You might argue that *Catcher* is a skilfully sustained portrait of a self-regarding male teenager undergoing the familiar trials and tribulations of that volatile stage of life. It is, after all, a story about one particular teenager at one particular time in one particular place.

It is also, by the way, a deeply sentimentalised attitude of the Romantic view of childhood, when, according to Wordsworth, 'trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home,' only for 'shades of the prison house' to 'close about the growing boy.'

But what you can't get away from is the novel's overtly stated 'wisdom' – never grow up – that 'truth' about life Hamilton says Holden *knows*.

Every novel, every story, even when it pretends to be an autobiographical portrait without authorial judgement or interpretive intrusion, is still a made object. No one needs to be told these days that every text has embedded in it a significance, a meaning, an ideology, whether the author intended it or not. And it is the author, let's remember, who gives the story its title, chooses its language and controlling images, sequences the events, and composes the pattern, the architecture, of the story's design.

The controlling image of *Catcher* is the children coming through the rye and Holden's place among them, the only 'big' person, who lives with the children in an unchanging world.

But it isn't only Holden who proposes this view of how life could best be lived. It's also *Salinger's novel itself*. Paul Ricoeur would call this 'the ethical aim' of the book. Nothing intervenes to unsettle Holden's asserted 'truth' of his unimaginative, immature 'wisdom.' Every indication, biographical as well as textual, is that Salinger consciously intended the proposal. He means what Holden says.

Before looking at the work of the teenaged Sagan I want to open to view one aspect of the critical thinking that informs what I'm doing and how I'm doing it.

Ethics, Morals, and Paul Ricoeur

'A novel,' wrote Milan Kundera, 'is a meditation on exist-ence seen through imaginary characters' (219).

What we all know is that the meditations we call novels, and in fact all stories of every kind, are narrative variations on what

happens, to whom, where, when, and why.

We are fascinated not so much by what people do as by the reasons for their behaviour. And when we know why, we wonder whether they might have behaved differently, and how we would have behaved in similar circumstances.

In other words, all stories are ethical and moral systems. They propose meanings and possibilities, reasons and motives, better rather than worse ways of living, whether their authors mean them to or not.

‘Nothing is more important,’ Wittgenstein suggested, ‘for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones’ (74^e).

‘Telling a story,’ wrote Paul Ricoeur, ‘is deploying an imaginary space for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in a hypothetical mode’ (*Oneself*, 170).

In his monumental three-volume *Time and Narrative*, and in *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur refines our understanding of stories as moral systems.

He makes a distinction between Ethics and Morality.

Ethics, he says, is the *aim* of an accomplished life.

Morality is the articulation of this aim in *norms of behaviour*.

Morality, he explains, ‘is held to constitute only a limited, although legitimate and even indispensable, actualisation of the ethical aim, and ethics in this sense would then encompass morality’ (*Oneself*, 170).

Ethics has primacy over morality. We have an *aim* in life, an aim for betterment or worthwhileness or purpose or justifiable achievement.

But this aim can be expressed and achieved only when it is passed through what Ricoeur calls ‘the sieve of the norm’ – in other words, by taking action, by *doing something*.

This very aporia – this puzzling problem of ethical aim set against moral behaviour – is the impasse at the end of *Catcher*.

Holden’s aim is to live his Never-Never-Land life alone with children. But as the moves of the plot pass him through the ‘sieve of the norms’ of the life he finds himself living because of the circumstances of his birth and history, he comes to a puzzled halt in the last chapter. He says he doesn’t want to tell us what happened when he went home and what he’s supposed to do next because he’s ‘sorry I told so many people.’

Why?

Because ‘all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about . . . It’s funny. Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.’ (220)

The so-far loquacious Holden is finally reduced to silence because he met a truth – a wisdom – he would rather not acknowledge.

No man is an island. You can only be yourself, you can only *become* yourself, in an active relationship of care and attention given to and received from others. And not as the only big person among immature children, but as an equal among those whose lives are as messy and as in need of help as you recognise yours to be.

Cecile and Sagan

It’s quite likely that Holden would write off Cecile, the central

character and focalising first-person narrator of Sagan's novel, as one of the phonies. After all, she adores her insouciant father, Raymond, a man in love with youth, a lothario who is a sucker for phony bimbos not much older than his daughter.

Bonjour Tristesse became an international bestseller soon after its publication in 1954. Like *Catcher* it spoke for a generation and authorised a set of fashions of thought and behaviour.

Before considering the differences between the two books, let's list the similarities:

Both stories are told chronologically without flashbacks or other intrusions, or metafictional devices to disturb the straightforward progress of the narrative.

Both are told in numbered chapters.

Both are short with no subplots or diversions. In that sense they are novellas rather than novels.

Both are narrated in the first person by their central characters.

Both central characters are the children of well-off parents. (Some would call them spoiled rich kids.)

The point of view and the revealed interior life belong to the central characters only.

The stories are told in the most conventional 'old fashioned' as against 'modernist' manner.

Holden and Cecile appealed to teenagers and young adults because they seemed to be new voices speaking for them the truths of life, truths they thought had not been expressed quite like this before. (Knowing nothing of literary history, they were wrong, of course. Think of Huckleberry Finn, the precursor of Holden Caulfield and the foundational model of all modern youth stories.)

Perhaps this partly explains their widespread success. The voices seemed new, contemporary and fresh, but the stories were very easy to read for those who had little or no literary education and who were not interested in literature for its own sake but only in the support the stories gave to their solipsistic view of life. (Thus Ian Hamilton requiring girlfriends to read *Catcher* to see if they 'got it' as a test of their suitability for the bestowing of his favours.)

But there are differences that set the two books apart, even put them at odds with each other.

Bonjour begins with the very information Holden says is crap, too much like the old, therefore outdated and irrelevant novels. Cecile tells about her father and their domestic set-up.

Bonjour makes no attempt to distance itself from the literary tradition to which it belongs and from which *Catcher* pretends to free itself.

I say pretends because *Catcher* is as attached to the American literary tradition begun by *Huckleberry Finn* as *Bonjour* is attached to a European, specifically French, tradition of the highly literary, and in many respects technically very conservative novella.

Holden regards all adults as phony. Cecile doesn't. Quite the opposite. She remarks on the enviable maturity of Anne, the forty-year-old sophisticated woman who is the cause of change and unsettlement.

Bonjour is in chapters but also in Two Parts. In the second part there is a significant growth in Cecile's character, a development that doesn't happen to Holden. Part Two begins

I'm surprised how clearly I remember everything from that

moment. I acquired an added awareness of other people and of myself. Until then I had always been spontaneous and light-hearted, but the last few days had upset me to the extent of forcing me to reflect and to look at myself with a critical eye. (51)

Holden never makes such progress.

In this essential sense, *Catcher* is static, harping on one theme, one unchanging condition, whereas *Bonjour* moves, grows, narrates an increasing understanding of the human condition.

There is also a difference in the attitude of the two characters to the people around them. Holden and Cecile are self-regarding teenagers, selfish, solipsistic, demanding of attention. But Holden is entirely inward. He looks only into himself. Whereas Cecile looks from herself outward. She asks herself how others might feel, what others might think, what others make of the circumstances in which she finds herself and which she has often created.

You might say one is very male in attitude and one female. The neuroscientists have shown us how much more emotionally developed most teenage girls are than most teenage boys. Holden is a typical, emotionally under-developed boy.

You might also say that there is an entirely different attitude on the part of the two authors to their stories and their characters.

The ethical aim of the two novels is different. Whereas Holden would rather not grow up, Cecile wants to but cuts herself off from doing so. One is unknowing, the other is knowing. One is unaware of what it is best to become, the other is aware of it but cannot achieve it.

So you would expect the two stories to end differently. But

they don't.

Catcher ends with Holden tongue-tied because he has discovered that if you tell about people – even though they are phony – you 'start missing' them.

Bonjour ends with Cecile living the same hedonistic, irresponsible, essentially immature life with her father they were living before Anne intruded and tried to help Cecile grow up.

Though Cecile wants to grow up, her attachment to her father is so strong it prevents her accepting Anne and the change she will bring about in their lives and relationships. Anne dies as a result of Cecile's deliberate, delinquent plot to prevent her marrying Raymond. Anne's death is both an event in the story and a metaphor of Cecile stifling her own development.

The only difference at the end of the two novels is that Cecile's memory now 'betrays her': 'that summer returns to me with all its memories. Anne, Anne, I repeat over and over again softly in the darkness. Then something rises in me that I welcome by name, with closed eyes: Bonjour tristesse' (108).

Hello sadness.

This is almost exactly Holden's realisation. 'You start missing everybody.'

But at least in Cecile's sadness there is awareness of what she could have been.

In both stories it is left to the reader to think beyond the characters, who are stuck in the kind of exquisite aporias of life and how to live it so enjoyed by narcissistic adoles-cents.

Is indeterminacy in play here – a dramatic irony which occurs when readers realize they know more than the characters? And if it is, is it deliberately intended by the authors?

In my opinion, Sagan intends it, but Salinger doesn't.

There is another distinct difference between the two novels in this regard.

Holden is motivated by a desire to de-identify. He is trying to separate himself from the adults around him by telling himself they are phony, without making any attempt to understand them. He does this in order to establish himself in his own mind as different from those who would otherwise influence and guide him – parents, teachers, peers, even his own brother. He thinks it's only possible to be himself by disregarding everyone else. But then discovers that when you try, you 'start missing' everybody.

Cecile on the other hand does everything she can to maintain her identification with – her possession of and her possession by – her father.

The two novels narrate the two poles of adolescent need. The need to free oneself from parental and childhood ties that get in the way of becoming what you imagine you want to be. And the need to be rooted and safe and unchangingly identified *as a self* determined by the birth conditions of one's life – family history, genetic makeup, education, cultural background.

These two urges are so embedded in the adolescent experience they might be considered significant features of a poetics of youth literature.

All stories of youth are inevitably stories of maturation.

In this sense, both are novels *about* youth.

But are they *youth literature* in any meaningful sense of the term?

Approaching tentative conclusions

What ingredients do the combined studies of these two books and the others I mentioned suggest might belong to a poetics?

Most obviously, the narratives are entirely controlled by the consciousness of youth. Point of view, attitudes, life-concerns, central characters, the phenomenological experience, are confined within what I call the ‘youthness’ of the story. Usually this is achieved by a first-person focalising narrator who is also the central character. But not always. It isn’t, for example, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

The narratives are straightforwardly told. To use Shklov-sky’s word, they are chronologically ‘stepped,’ without intrusive metafictional or alienating devices. It is as if twentieth-century modernism never happened.

But do they always have to be like that? Or is it an accident of chance that the classic novels written by teen-agers happen to be so rudimentary in form?

The usual wisdom is that teenagers like to be radical, experimental, avant-garde, innovative, anti-conventional.

Is it the case that these sample books became classics only because conservative adult readers decided they are, and that radical, anti-conventional writing by teenagers isn’t published in the mainstream and exists only as a kind of samizdat? I suspect this may be so.

The six books by teenagers – all novels except Anne Frank’s *Diary* – are ethically and morally aware. They take a stance on how to behave and why, and make this clear both overtly by their narrator’s statements and covertly by the construction of their

stories.

Only *Catcher*, the book *not* written by a teenager, leaves the drawing of ethical and moral conclusions to the reader's interpretation, except for Holden's overt statement that it is better not to grow up. Does this mean that overtly stated ethical and moral consciousness is an integral and desirable element of youth literature and therefore a pre-ferential feature of its poetics?

One degradation wrought by the more over-excited Structuralists and Post-structuralists has been the displacement of ethical criticism from literary theory, and the devaluing of practical criticism as against literary theory. Thank goodness, there are signs we are recovering from this aberration. An example. One of our best literary critics, James Wood, was recently appointed at Harvard to the new post of Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism. Shklovsky says of the Structuralists: 'I'm familiar with all that has been done by Structuralists, and I see too much terminology floating around, which may be effective, but I'm not sure how to approach the essence of a composition with all this terminology' (179).

In no sector of literary activity is a consideration of ethics more pertinent, indeed essential, than in the apprehension of youth literature, for the obvious reason that this is literature inevitably concerned both in its fictions and in its emergent-adult readers with the development of human consciousness and moral perception.

Besides this, the information now coming from the neuroscientists, telling us in astonishing detail how the brain works, especially when we are reading and writing, and the mental and emotional growth of teenagers, indicates that we cannot avoid taking biological development into account when

thinking about literature and the young. And this too has ethical implications.

The emergence of evocriticism – literary criticism which is informed by the study of the environment – and of neurocriticism – which is informed by the work of the brain scientists – seem to me essential tools in all literary studies now, but are particularly helpful with a poetics of youth literature. Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (2009), mentioned earlier, is pertinent, as is Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid: The Story of Science and the Reading Brain* (2007).

That a literature of youth, as evidenced by the six classic texts, must inevitably deal with maturation, with de-identification, along with questions of identity and life-purpose, because these are endemic in youthness, indicates that ethical, moral, and spiritual recognitions, and their profound aporias, are unavoidably present, and must be addressed in a poetics of the form.

Even this small sample of literature written by the young themselves demonstrates that it is not a mere genre, because it can include all genres. *Bonjour Tristesse*, *The Devil in the Flesh*, and S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* are novels of everyday life. *Frankenstein* is variously regarded as gothic horror, a precursor of science fiction, and as a meditation on the mysterious wellsprings of creativity. Anne Frank's *Diary* is an autobiographical journal, which at the time of her arrest she was reshaping as an autobiografiction.

And yet! It still could be argued that everything I've mentioned is simply literature, which happens to pay attention to the lives of

adolescents. That there is nothing of such peculiar speciality in any of the books that identifies them as belonging to a distinct form.

This is all very sketchy, no more than a hint of what I'm working at. It will take me a Shklovskian length of time and rigorous process of thought to come to a useful and demonstrated conclusion, not least because, as a freelance writer, it must be done without the time-providing and resource benefits of institutional support or research grants. But after a lifetime spent working with literature and the young, it seems to me worth the attempt. And, I might add, the fun is in the thinking and the writing, rather than the result.

Works Cited

- Blaney, Shirlie. 'Interview with J. D. Salinger.' *If You Really Want to Hear About It: Writers on J.D. Salinger and His Work*. Ed. Catherine Crawford. New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 2006. 3-4.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Boyd, Brian. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge: Belknap Press / Harvard UP, 2009.
- Hamilton, Ian. *In Search of J.D. Salinger*. London: Heinemann, 1988
- Kundera, Milan. Interview. *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Seventh Series. London: Secker & Warburg, 1987.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol 1. Trans. Kathleen

- McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol 2. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol 3. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Sagan, Françoise. *Bonjour Tristesse*. Trans. Irene Ash. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.
- Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot*. Trans. Shushan Avagyan. Champaign IL: Dalkey Archive P, 2007.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Trans. Peter Winch. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.

This essay is based on a lecture given in honour of Professor Rita Ghesquière of Leuven University, Belgium, on her retirement, 17 October 2009, and is an edited version of the text that appeared in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 34, No. 3, September 2010, pp 267- 283.

© Copyright Aidan Chambers 2009, 2012