

# "The Happiest Days of your Life"

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Lilian R. Furst

“THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE”

“The Happiest Days of Your Life:” this once popular catchphrase description of school seems to have a decidedly ironic ring. Certainly, if one considers the image of school in the literature of adolescence in the twentieth century, it is unhappiness that emerges repeatedly as the primary and overriding feature. The examples are numerous, both in the opening years of the century (e.g. Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* [1903], Hermann Hesse’s *Unterm Rad* [1905], Robert Musil’s *Die Verwirrungen des Jünglings Törless* [1906], James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916]), and more recently (e.g. J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* [1951], Giorgio Bassani’s *Dietro la Porta* [1964], and Chaim Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* [1972]). It is worth noting, moreover, that these examples cover not only a considerable expanse in time but also in place and social level: from several areas of the Old World as well as of the New, from the prosperous upper middle class to the impoverished, from Catholics, to Protestants and Orthodox Jews. Unhappiness at school, it would seem, is a constant of its literary iconology.

However, since the protagonists chosen for portrayal in the literature of adolescence are almost invariably the sensitive outsiders, this is not so surprising. More surprising perhaps is the frequent occurrence of school scenes. For school is a theme less centrally associated with adolescence than such issues as family strife, the generation gap, self-discovery, the quest for one’s identity and place in society, sexual gropings, etc. But although school, as an episode in the human life cycle, harks back to childhood rather than looking forward to adulthood, nonetheless it is an integral and important component of adolescence. Like adolescence itself, school is essentially a transitional experience, between the playworld of childhood and

the earnest pursuits of adulthood. Occupying as it does that crucial "space between"<sup>1</sup> childhood and adulthood, school often represents the first independent steps outside the cocoon of the family, and hence one of the earliest testing places of the adolescent's personal strength. It thus has a particular significance in the context of adolescent growth insofar as it forces the confrontation of an authoritarian system that is the reflection of the dominant ethos of the social establishment that has nurtured and shaped it. So the pressures of the school experience precipitate in the adolescent a serious self-assessment, a process whereby the private inner values he cherishes find an embryonic formulation. It is generally in the school setting that the adolescent first becomes conscious of the conflict between public and private, outer and inner standards. If school is a microcosm of society, the adolescent's attitude to school and his handling of the school situation may be taken as a barometer of his capacity and, perhaps even more important, of his willingness for social adjustment. Depending on his disposition, the adolescent will either adapt to the prevailing norms by conforming to the expectations imposed on him from without, or he will try to assert his own identity through his refusal to submit and his espousal of his own criteria, however tentative and experimental these may as yet be.

What matters in this school experience is not so much the external reality as the adolescent's perception of it. Obviously one should not conclude from the literature of adolescence that most school systems are repressive, nor that most school experiences are bitter. It is a literary image that we are dealing with. And since the narrative stance is frequently first-person, from the perspective of the adolescent himself, the resultant representation is inevitably far from objective. Yet in that very subjectivity lies the central import of the school experience. The adolescent's reactions to the school system and his apprehension of his own standing within it become at once a

1 Jerome H. Buckley, *Season of Youth* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1974) p. 1. The phrase "space between" is indebted to a letter by Keats of April 1918: "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted."

metaphor for his total self-perception and a prefiguration of the ultimate development of his mature personality. For the outcome of that first encounter with a social organization beyond the limits of the family tends to act as a powerful determinant of his self-image and a lasting crystallization of his future behavioral patterns.

The psychological undercurrents implicit in this process surface in the literary text through the medium of language. Rarely are the words those of an extraneous commenting narrator; the fiction of adolescence, with its frequent autobiographical origins, shows a marked preference for the direct, telling speech of the experiencing persona. The rhetoric of the adolescent protagonist offers immediate insight to his mind, and therefore becomes a cardinal means of characterization. This holds true irrespective of whether it is the rhetoric of acquiescence or that of rebellion.

I propose to examine the use of language for the portrayal of the adolescent mentality in three narratives selected specifically for their disparateness in time and place: Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad* (*Beneath the Wheel*) which was published in 1905 and is set in a lower middle class Protestant German environment; J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* of 1951 which is upper middle class in social level, and on the other side of the Atlantic; and Giorgio Bassani's *Dietro la Porta* (*Behind the Door*) which appeared in 1964 but which depicts happenings in Italy some thirty-five years earlier at the dawn of Fascism, also in an upper middle class milieu already strongly aware of religious and racial affiliations. Two of these three, *Dietro la Porta* and *Catcher in the Rye*, are consistently first-person narratives; the third, *Unterm Rad*, has a shifting perspective, switching from the external view-point of a largely invisible, impersonal narrator into the mind of the central protagonist. In each of these works, therefore, the adolescent's own perception of school comes across from the language in which he expresses himself.

I will begin with Hesse's *Unterm Rad* not because it is chronologically the earliest (the temporal dimension is of relatively little importance in the psychological arena), but because it shows two contrasting adolescents side by side, and so encompasses both archetypal poles: the idiom of acquiescence in Hans Giebenrath's thoughts, and the rhetoric of rebellion in Hermann Heilner's outbursts:

Hans sagte natürlich zu. Zwar erschien ihm diese Lukasstunde wie eine leichte Wolke am fröhlichen blauen Himmel seiner Freiheit, doch schämte er sich abzulehnen. Und eine neue Sprache so in den Ferien nebenher zu lernen, war gewiß mehr Vergnügen als Arbeit. Vor dem vielen Neuen, das im Seminar zu lernen wäre, hatte er ohnehin eine leise Furcht, besonders vor dem Hebräischen.<sup>2</sup>

And here is Hermann Heilner:

„Das lesen wir Homer“, höhnte er weiter, „wie wenn die Odyssee ein Kochbuch wäre. Zwei Verse in der Stund“, und dann wird Wort für Wort wiedergekaut und untersucht, bis es einem zum Ekel wird. Aber am Schluß der Stunde heißt es dann jedesmal: Sie sehen, wie fein der Dichter das gewendet hat, Sie haben hier einen Blick in das Geheimnis des dichterischen Schaffens getan! Bloß so als Soße um die Partikeln und Aoriste herum, damit man nicht ganz dran erstickt. Auf die Art kann mir der ganze Homer gestohlen werden. Überhaupt was geht uns eigentlich das alte griechische Zeug an? Wenn einer von uns einmal probieren wollte, ein bißchen griechisch zu leben, so würde er rausgeschmissen. Dabei heißt unsere Stube Hellas! Der reine Hohn! Warum heißt sie nicht, ‚Papierkorb‘ oder ‚Sklavenkäfig‘ oder ‚Angströhre‘? Das ganze klassische Zeug ist ja Schwindel.“<sup>3</sup>

A fundamental difference between the two immediately becomes apparent in the literary presentation: Hans' thoughts remain unvoiced, contained in an internalized monologue with himself, whereas Hermann's are vented in an explosive paroxysm. This denotes that Hermann is able to rid himself of a great deal of anger by his aggressive verbalization of his animosities. Such healthy catharsis is alien, inaccessible to Hans, the 'good,' submissive youth, anxious always to please by complying with every directive. He is the prototype of the outer oriented adolescent, who denies and represses his own desires in order to conform to a matrix outlined for him by others. That matrix, however, does not fit him, and as the discrepancy grows between the extrinsic mould and the inward substance, he simply crumples and disintegrates. He has neither the self-esteem nor the toughness to develop a firm and confident base of selfhood from which to make a stand against the inroads of an exploitative set of

2 Hermann Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 2, p. 44. All subsequent references are to this edition.

3 Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, p. 74.

adults who use him as an object whereby to bolster their own vanity. Hans is caught in a vicious circle: the longer he is the good boy, the “Musterknabe,”<sup>4</sup> the longer he in fact opts for compromise, the slimmer are his prospects of ever evolving into independence. The passage that I have cited, that comes fairly early in his career, clearly reveals his tendency to accommodate in his repeated recourse to the language of concession: “zwar,” “doch,” “gewiß,” “ohnehin.” Cowed by the fear of failure and unquestioningly subservient to the moral categories of his milieu, Hans’s bearing is motivated by such negative drives as anxiety, shame, and timidity. By taking the easy path of assent, he not only sacrifices his own immediate wishes — the freedom to swim, to fish, to relax; he also engages in a devious tactic of self-deception as he tries to persuade himself that the outer imperatives to which he yields correspond to his inner interests. Through this self-delusion he drifts into the servile acquiescence that becomes so habitual and so invasive as to squelch any vestige of personal appetites. His complicity is at the root of his collapse. In its low-key, muted, understated tone, Hans’s language is a haunting incarnation of the constraint under which he labors as well as of the insidiously progressive (or rather: regressive) dissolution of his own personality. His idiom is as tame and colorless as the “Hauskatze”<sup>5</sup> (“domestic cat”) to which he is compared.

The flamboyant dissent of Hermann Heilner is obviously a foil and an antithesis to Hans Giebenrath’s acquiescence. Hermann’s is the rhetoric of protest with its satirical invective, its energetic colloquialisms, its exclamatory vigor, its earthy imagery, and its high emotional charge. Through his indignation Hermann expresses both his criticism of the prevailing school dogma as pusillanimous and hypocritical, and at the same time his resolute will to beliefs of his own. The jagged syntax with its rapid succession of short, uneven constructions conveys the forcefulness of adolescent rebellion in its iconoclastic denunciation of scholastic and, by extension, social

4 Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, pp. 79, 92, 104.

5 Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, p. 81.



values. In contrast to the domestic cat, Hermann is the “Adler”<sup>6</sup> (“eagle”) with the imperious self-confidence to heed his inner dictates and to soar to liberty. He translates his angry words into deeds by fleeing the “Käfig”<sup>7</sup> (“cage”) of school to seek out a path consonant with his aspirations. Whether his arrogant repudiation of systematic, outer discipline will lead to a happier outcome than Hans Giebenrath’s resigned submission is left open to conjecture in *Unterm Rad*. However, Hermann does have the strength to confront and challenge an authority that he deems false, and the urge to fight for his personal identity and ideals. The ardor of his commitment to this enterprise is implicit in the intensity of his speech. At the two extremes of acquiescence and protest, in Hans and Hermann, Hesse makes skilful use of the medium of language as an indirect method of characterization that gives the reader direct access to the adolescent psyche.

The same technique is adopted, with even greater brilliance, by Salinger and Bassani. The enframing comments of the adult narrator in *Unterm Rad*, such as, for example, the “höhnte er weiter” (“he continued with derision”) at the beginning of Hermann’s tirade, are wholly absent in the first person narratives, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Dietro la Porta*, both of which establish the fictional illusion of autobiography. In *Dietro la Porta* the autobiography is retrospective as the adult recollects the formative experience of his adolescence. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, on the other hand, the narrating persona is the adolescent himself. His is the vivid, emphatic, inflated, slangy language of that age and that period (1951) that Salinger captures with extraordinary verve:

One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That’s all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody’s parents when they drove up to school. He’d be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should’ve seen

6 Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, p. 115.

7 Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, p. 114.

the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills.<sup>8</sup>

This has the rhythm and raciness of spoken language, though Holden is actually recording his memories in writing as part of his therapy. Be that as it may, the colloquial style creates a sense of immediacy that lends credence to Holden's virulent views. His basic position is similar to that of Hermann Heilner in *Unterm Rad*, though his focus is less on the situation within the classroom than on the social aspects of the school environment. (This shift of emphasis may reflect a difference in approach to the question of school between the United States and Europe: Bassani too, unlike Salinger and like Hesse, concentrates on the classroom situation.) Holden unequivocally equates the priorities of his schools with the pecking order of society at large; that is to say, he envisages school as an emblematic cipher for the social system. In both the microcosm of school and the macrocosm of society he attacks the same defects: hypocrisy, materialism, intolerance of eccentricity, standardization, judgement by appearance. So Holden resembles Hermann Heilner in his refusal to be regimented into public ideologies that he rejects as "phony." The repetition of that word three times in quite a short space underscores its central importance as a key concept in Holden's scale of values. Like two other favorite adjectives of his, "corny" and "crazy," "phony" is rather a vague, modish term that carries strong emotive undercurrents and widely suggestive implications. Holden's vocabulary is still that of a child, while his insights are those of an adult.

The surface slanginess and seeming artlessness of Holden's language conceals a considerable manipulative sophistication on

8 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1951, p. 19.



Salinger's part. The rhetoric of *The Catcher in the Rye*, beneath its casualness, is calculated to make an impact on the reader. The "you," though aimed here at a particular listener within the fiction, the old teacher Spencer, addresses too the reader beyond the limits of the fiction, drawing him in as a kind of eye-witness audience. A similar effect is achieved through the use of a concrete scene very specific in its details; and those details are at once physically visual ("those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes") and symbolically denotative. The appeal of Holden's language is further heightened by the tragi-comic tone, which stems largely from his frequent patently absurd overstatements ("They were coming in the goddam window"). This unconscious humor on Holden's part differentiates him from Hermann Heilner whose bitterness is the more venomous for its solemnity. By means of the rhetoric and the presentation, Salinger makes a 'bad,' rebellious adolescent attractive and sympathetic. It is Holden's naive idealism, his tenderness, his empathy with the underdog and the misfit that inspire his defiance of outer values. *The Catcher in the Rye* fuses in the figure of Holden the pathos of Hans Giebenrath and the heroism of Hermann Heilner. Holden is both victim and assailant, child and adult, in his struggle to find his idiom and his identity.

The first-person narration of *The Catcher in the Rye* is combined in Bassani's *Dietro la Porta* with the thematics of *Unterm Rad*. The tense balance of attempted friendship and rivalry between two contrasting school-fellows is presented here through the eyes of a narrator who remains mysteriously anonymous and somehow faceless. The son of a prosperous, educated, caring (perhaps smothering) Jewish family, he is a 'good' boy, like Hans Giebenrath, though a far more gifted student. Not as gifted, however, nor as experienced in worldly and sexual matters as his admired desk-mate whose name is, portentously, Cattolica. Already he is dimly aware of his ambivalent position in relation to the school and social establishment. As a member of the class, he is of course a part of it, yet he stands on the periphery, like a somewhat grudgingly tolerated supplicant, forced to make wooing advances, and learning even now to bear the burden of exclusion. He perceives himself as an outsider, like Holden Caulfield and Hermann Heilner, but unlike them this is not by his choice. For

he again recalls Hans Giebenrath too in his striving to integrate. Far from voicing criticism at a school system that encourages vicious rivalry, he condones it by his participation in the competition and by his respect for success.

As in *The Catcher in the Rye*, a small concrete scene, here in the classroom, serves as a paradigm of the larger latent issues:

Sedevamo vicini, adesso, a poche decine di centimetri l'uno dall'altro, ma qualcosa, una specie di barriera non distinguibile a occhio nudo, di segreta demarcazione di confine, ci impediva di comunicare con la libera familiarità dell'amicizia. Io, per la verità, da principio avevo tentato qualche timida *avance*, consistente per esempio nella richiesta, un giorno di compito in classe di latino, di poter collocare in via eccezionale i due grossi volumi del mio Georges di là dal piccolo tramezzo che divideva in spazi rigorosamente uguali i ripostigli per libri e quaderni. Senonché il freddo movimento rotatorio, limitato a pochissimi gradi, che Cattolica, consentendo, aveva fatto compiere all'asse del proprio viso, mi aveva subito dissuaso dall'insistere con altre manovre del genere. Come due giovani sposi, unitisi non per scelta spontanea ma per volontà superiore, stavamo assieme ben consapevoli, entrambi, del significato sociale e della mondana importanza della nostra unione. Lui, Cattolica, era stato, al ginnasio, sempre il più bravo della sezione A: dalla prima fino alla quinta (per non parlare delle elementari, che i maestri, nei corridoi, si passavano in giro i suoi componimenti). Ma anche io, pur concedendomi ogni tanto qualche pausa (la matematica non era mai stata il mio forte: verissimo, ma che cos'è la matematica al liceo classico?), anche io, in fondo, avevo sempre fatto parte dei ristretti gruppi di testa... Cortesi, educati, sì; disposti perfino a fingere, davanti agli altri, l'affetto e la solidarietà delle coppie meglio assortite: però estranei, in sostanza, copertamente rivali, anzi nemici. E non era giusto, dopo tutto? – pensavo –. Non era bene che risultando, come risultavamo, i porta-bandiera di due schiere contrapposte *ab antiquo*, noi due ci comportassimo così? Ognuno al suo posto: non era proprio questa la regola alla quale avrei desiderato che tutti quanti si fossero attenuti?<sup>9</sup>

- 9 Giorgio Bassani, *Dietro la Porta*, Torino, Einaudi, 1964, pp. 22-23. All subsequent references are to this edition. Translated by William Weaver; *Behind the Door*, New York, Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1972, pp. 16-17. *Dietro la Porta* spans one academic year (1929-1930) in the life of the anonymous first-person narrator-protagonist, the fifteen year old son of a Jewish professional family. The setting is in Ferrara at the time of the first stirrings of Fascism in Italy. Through the betrayal and ostracism inflicted on him by his school fellows, the narrator-protagonist is forced into a

The covert enmity beneath the veneer of civilized behavior, the imminent crumbling of the fragile castles of social hypocrisy, the “*significato sociale*” (“social significance”) of this juxtaposition of an adversary pair as well matched intellectually as they are mismatched personally. The little episode of the seating in the classroom is a perfect cameo that encapsulates and foreshadows the narrator’s entire development: his failure to rebel, to confront, to assert himself, his tendency to acquiescence, his impotence, his selfconsciousness, and the resultant feeling of guilt, epitomized in the “*ferita segreta*”<sup>10</sup> (“secret wound”) that blights his life. His reaction to this early experience of rejection illustrates both the precariousness of his unformed sense of self-worth and a precocious capacity to appreciate dispassionately an alien point of view: “*E non era giusto, dopo tutto?*” (“And wasn’t it right, after all?”). His tolerance is an indication of a curious blend of immaturity and maturity: immaturity in his pliancy, the insecurity of his inner values and his ultimately damaging passivity, but also maturity in his calm resignation, his acceptance of the inevitable, his acknowledgement of the futility of combatting a powerful outer order, namely nascent Fascist demagoguery. His isolation is intimated in the form of his narrative: his monologue is not addressed to any explicit or implicit “you,” as is Holden’s in *The Catcher in the Rye*; it seems more like a conversation with himself, an introverted scrutiny of his history, the springs of his actions and the sources of his failures. The description, as it moves from observation to reflection, is notable for its lack of agitation even though it recalls painful memories. Controlled and to all appearances tranquil and easy-going as the conversational style is, it nonetheless hints at a desire for repression in its overt rationalization as much as in its deliberate poise. The rhetorical questions at the end

consciousness of the burden of his mysterious differentness that he will carry henceforth all his life. This is symbolized in the “bleeding wound” which he mentions on the first page and whose origins are the subject of his narrative. The plot is handled with the utmost subtlety, in an endeavor perhaps to illustrate the insidious effect of the snide insinuations of which the narrator-protagonist is the victim, and which ultimately undermine his self-confidence.

10 Bassani, *Dietro la Porta*, p. 9.

of the meditation, however, unmask that sanguine pose as a mere pose in their hesitancy, their obvious search for reassurance, their oblique disclosure of the writer's gnawing doubts and his longing for certainty. Here already is the silhouette of the person secretly wounded by the knowledge of his self-betrayal. He will always remain as he is in this passage: anonymous, hidden from us and from himself "behind the door." Only the disembodied voice reaches out to us through the virtuosity of Bassani's delicate presentation.

The school-related incidents that I have analyzed in this paper are all relatively slight in the economy of the narratives in which they occur. Nevertheless, each is of crucial significance, and despite the considerable diversity of actual content, their literary function is remarkably similar. Through their language and their specific focus they are used as a means of characterization and of self-revelation on the part of the adolescent. What is more, they play a symbolic role insofar as the adolescent's early stance vis-a-vis the problems of school offer a metaphoric prefiguration of his later total personality profile. For each of the protagonists in these three novels the school experience proves a turning-point, indeed literally a breaking-point in their development. The actual 'breaking' may be active or passive: either the adolescent breaks out of the school and social system in which he has been enframed, or he is broken by it. The former, the active route, is that of the rebels: Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Hermann in *Unterm Rad*. In the lives of both, school is the catalytic occasion for their instinctive rebellion; in facing the restraints and demands for conformity represented by school, they reveal their personalities as critical individualists whose ironic detachment will always make them outsiders. At the other extreme, the passive acquiescers, Hans in *Unterm Rad*, and the protagonist in *Dietro la Porta*, are morally broken at school. Their recognition of their incapacity for tough self-assertion leads to a damaging loss of self-esteem. Both come to perceive themselves as unequivocal failures as a result of their traumatic school experiences. In the case of Hans, the total lack of any sense of self-worth is the ultimate cause of his physical death, while for the protagonist of *Dietro la Porta* it is a figurative death when his faith in friends, family, sincerity and goodness is for ever blighted, and he writes himself off spiritually.

Heterogenous though the school experiences are, in every instance they mark a decisive crossroads in adolescent development, fixing the pattern of future relationships as well as self-image.

The extent to which the role of school is seen in these three works as a pivotal rite of passage of adolescence depends on the narrative view-point and also on the temporal dimensions involved. Where the view-point is retrospective, with an extensive suspension between narrated time and narrative time, as in *Dietro la Porta*, the school segment of the protagonist's life can be evaluated with some definity in the light of his subsequent development. Where the distance between narrated time and narrating time is small, as in *The Catcher in the Rye*, judgement is inevitably less certain partly because of the emotional closeness of the related experience, and partly because the closure of adolescence has not yet been completed. Holden does not know what will become of him, and we too can speculate. Moreover, in *The Catcher in the Rye* and in *Dietro la Porta* the first-person view-point may conceivably entail a subjective distortion of school and its reality, for which the narrative contains no possibility of objective correction. In compensation, however, the first-person narration carries an affective urgency that is greatly attenuated in the somewhat clumsy third-person presentation in *Unterm Rad*.<sup>11</sup> Here too, notwithstanding the radical difference in view-point as compared to *The Catcher in the Rye*, the fate of the rebel, Hermann, remains a matter of conjecture since he is allowed to disappear from the narrative as he did from school. Only the drowned corpse of Hans affords incontrovertible evidence of the baneful role of school for this particular adolescent.

School may not be "happiest days of your life," but the twentieth century fiction of adolescence is in concurrence with the findings of modern psychology in deeming them among the most consequential.

11 *Unterm Rad* is quite obviously an early, immature work of Hesse's, though the tendency to overt and rather portentous comment remains an artistic flaw even in his mature writing.



Lilian R. Furst

„DIE GLÜCKLICHSTEN TAGE DES LEBENS“  
(Zusammenfassung)

Die englische sprichwörtliche Beschreibung der Schulzeit als „die glücklichsten Tage unseres Lebens“ hat in Bezug auf die Darstellung des Schulerlebnisses in der Erzählkunst des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts einen ausgesprochen ironischen Klang. In zahlreichen Beispielen aus verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Schichten sowohl in Europa wie in Amerika erweist sich die Schule nicht nur als eine Zeit der Qual und des Selbstzweifels sondern auch als eine Krise in der Entwicklung des Jünglings, dem hier zum ersten Mal der Zwiespalt zwischen den öffentlichen Forderungen und den privaten Bedürfnissen bewußt entgegen tritt. Da die Schule in vieler Hinsicht als ein Mikrokosmos der großen Welt gelten darf, ist sein Verhalten in der Schulsituation oft für seine zukünftige Einstellung der Lebensproblematik gegenüber wesensbestimmend. Auflehnung und Einstimmung, die beiden typischen Hauptpole der jugendlichen Reaktion, sind im literarischen Werk in der Redensweise der Figuren deutlich verkörpert. Zum Beispiel, in *Unterm Rad* (1905) von Hermann Hesse stehen die aufschneiderischen Tiraden von Hermann Heilner von der zaghaften Zustimmung von Hans Giebenrath grell ab. Ihrer charakteristischen Sprachform entsprechend, bricht Heilner aus dem „Käfig“ der Schulordnung aus, während Giebenrath in stiller Selbstaufgabe untergeht. Noch eindeutiger wirkt die Sprache als Index des Gesamtverhaltens in zwei Romanen, wo die Hauptfigur in einer fiktiven Autobiographie ihre eigenen Erfahrungen darstellt: *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) von J.D. Salinger, und *Dietro la Porta* (1964) von Giorgio Bassani. Die Tragikomik des amerikanischen Rebellen Holden Caulfield entspringt aus dem Gegensatz zwischen seiner reifen, oder gar überreifen, Wertung der Schule (und der Gesellschaft) und seinem kindischen Wortschatz und seinen überschwenglichen Redewendun-



gen. Die Äußerungen des namenlosen Erzählers in *Dietro la Porta* hingegen haben eine Gelassenheit, welche ein verzweifeltes Ver- und Entsagen vor sich selbst verbirgt. Als Übergang von Kindheit zu erwachsener Selbständigkeit erscheint die Schule in der Erzählkunst des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts wohl nicht als das glücklichste, doch als das entscheidende Erlebnis der Jugend.