THE TINY AND GROTESQUE VISION IN CARSON MCCULLERS' REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

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In the action of Carson McCullers' first novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, its Christ-figure, John Singer the deaf-mute, has been conceived as an all-comprehending mind through whose patient listening each of the other major characters expresses his heart's longings. Yet Singer himself has suffered no less intense loneliness than his fellow characters. After the death of his beloved friend Antonapoulos, Singer takes his life in a rented room. For his fellow characters, all hope of slavation, of even temporary release through empathetic union with a listening mind, has gone to the grave with him. The negativism of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* thus subsists in its basic denial of redemption. Yet in spite of such negativism, Singer still emerges as a sympathetic character who dies of love's excess (Tseng, "Love and Loneliness" 240-252).

Carson McCullers' second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, shows a marked change of mood and tone when compared with its predecessor. Appearing in two installments in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1940, and in book form in 1941, it appeared to focus, with a clinical detachment that was reflected in the clean simplicity of its style, upon the still more sombre aspects of human existence. Set in an army post in the South, clearly modeled on Fort Benning, Georgia, where the husband of McCullers' music teacher had been based, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is concerned with the same themes of love and loneliness that were found in her first work. While providing continuity, the themes are, however, developed to more bizarre conclusions. No loving and lovable Christ figure redeems the starkness of the army post world. As Simeon Smith has noted, "To turn from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* to her second novel is to open a door from a warm loquacious fireside upon a gothic winter wasteland" (32).

Upon its appearance, the book aroused a wave of adverse criticism. In seeking not so much to rebut the criticism as to right the balance, Tennessee Williams, writing an introduction to a new edition of the book in 1950, spoke of the Gothic School of American writers. Williams stated that although this school had "a very ancient lineage," it had relatively recently been brought into prominence by the early novels of Faulkner. Williams went on to link the American Gothic School with the French Existentialist School which, he said, was also attributable to forces more significant than the personal influence of Jean-Paul Sartre. The common link between these French and American schools, Williams continued, "is most simply definable as a sense, an intuition of underlying dreadfulness in modern experience" (ix-x). Williams continued:

> *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is one of the purest and most powerful of these works which are conceived in that Sense of the Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art, from the *Guernica* of Picasso to the cartoons of Charles Addams. (xiv)

Whether Williams succeeds in righting the balance is open to debate. A sense of the awful does indeed pervade *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. The military setting alone assures the reader's consciousness of the "underlying dreadfulness" of which Williams spoke, for in the last resort the business of the military is to know how to inflict death and destruction. But the revulsion on the part of many readers may have other roots—for example, the fact that McCullers' second novel portrays a world in which alienation has become irreversible. The army camp lies as psychologically isolated from the rest of the world as the mill town in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. It becomes a seedbed of violence and bizarre action. Murder, which in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* occurs near the fairground in a haphazard way and is committed in the heat of passion by persons unknown, has now moved to the center of the stage. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, one of the principal characters is a murderer, another becomes a victim. Certainly such characters, while physically more "normal" than those of the earlier novel, are in reality more grotesque because of their emotional eccentricity.

Whether this progression into a starker world represented a part of McCullers' natural evolution as a writer, or whether she herself was temporarily affected by the conditions of her personal life at the time the book was written, must remain a matter of debate. As Smith relates:

> ... the novel was written in the space of two months after Mrs. McCullers had finished *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* .... Reeves McCullers had told his wife that there was a voyeur on the Army post nearby [Fort Bragg]. On this basis alone she wrote the first paragraph of the book .... Her husband ... hurt his foot on a hike. While nursing him day and night and living under the most squalid circumstances in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Mrs. McCullers produced *Reflections*. Through the plywood walls of their rooms, she could hear a sick child wailing, a child with a tumor. His father would hit him on the head to keep him quiet. She felt she "simply had to do something for fun. *Reflections* was just for fun. *Heart* was very, very serious. My lingual joy was *Reflections*." (32-33)

The title itself, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, refers to a painting made by one of the characters, Anacleto, a Filipino houseboy:

> 'Look!' Anacleto said suddenly .... 'A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and— ....'
> 'Grotesque,' she finished for him.
> He nodded shortly. 'Exactly.' (59)

The image was foreshadowed in one of the author's short stories, "Instant of the Hour After," probably written in 1935 or 1936. A couple has been talking after their party is over and the guests have left, and the wife catches sight of an empty bottle:

> And as she stared at the empty bottle she had one of those grotesque little imaginings that were apt to come to her at that hour. She saw herself and Marshall—in the whiskey bottle. Revolting in their smallness and perfection. Skeetering angrily up and down the cold blank glass like minute monkeys.... (*Mortgaged* 60)

In the immense golden eye of the peacock, no less than in the void in the empty bottle, one perceives reflections of human existence continuing senselessly, suspended over an abyss, supported by nothing. If *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is pervaded by a sense of the grotesque and the dreadfulness of life, the title seeks to express that grotesqueness, that dreadfulness, in the form of a symbol. According to Ihab Hassan, the golden eye of the peacock reflects a world in which men "move toward an inexorable fate" caused by their own unavoidable action. It is the great golden eye through which the grotesque thoughts and actions of each character are mirrored objectively without commentary by the artist. The eye can reflect what it sees and is powerless to effect any decisive action on the participants who move before it (*Radical Innocence* 216). *Reflections in a Golden Eye* indeed opens a door upon the tiny, grotesque, and empty side of life.

In the first paragraph of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Carson McCullers summarizes the novel. "There is a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed," she wrote. The participants of this tragedy are introduced as ingredients in a recipe: "two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse" (3). The six human characters are involved almost from the story's opening in an ill-starred pair of love triangles whose duration can only be as brief as their resolutions must be violent. One by one they carry out their inevitable destinies. McCullers takes them forward to those tragic resolutions with surgical precision. She suggests that there may be some underlying pattern, some meaning, to all this. She describes the "certain rigid pattern" (3) of the army post, the trees "that patterned the lawn and the walk with cool delicate, windblown shadows," (3) the sun which makes its "firey golden patterns on the ground," (6) "the pattern of flying birds against the winter sunset," (25)—each item suggesting that, perhaps, there is an overall pattern to events that the human eye cannot discern, but the style, intent on reporting only the details of each event, indicates that there is actually no such kind of underlying meaning in the lives of the protagonists.

The characters of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* subsist inextricably in an emotional and geographic exile at the story's beginning—the army camp forming a sort of sterile corral, the alientation of each as pronounced as if each were confined to a private pen. The soldier in the novel is Private Ellgee Williams. "Ellgee" is the phonetic rendering

of the initials "L.G.," which do not in fact stand for anything—a subtle suggestion, undoubtedly, that the man is a cipher. A "silent young soldier" who has "neither an enemy nor a friend" in the barracks, Williams has a gift for dealing with horses and works in the stables. He feels but does not think; rather, he experiences life "without making any mental résumé of his present or past actions" (62). Often, when someone asks him what he has been thinking about, he truthfully answers, "Nothing." In the past, following his own momentary impulses, he had bought a cow, made a violent and convulsive declaration of faith in God, stabbed a Negro to death in an argument over a wheelbarrow of manure and successfully hidden the body without any sense of guilt, and he had enlisted in the army. "Each of these happenings had come about very suddenly and without any conscious planning on his part" (21). McCullers develops the notion of the absence of conscious planning more succinctly in a later passage on the mentality of Private Williams:

> The mind is like a richly woven tapestry in which the colors are distilled from the experiences of the senses, and the design drawn from the convolutions of the intellect. The mind of Private Williams was imbued with various colors of strange tones, but it was without delineation, void of form. (62)

An added idiosyncracy of Williams' character is that, because he has had little contact with women during his life, he believes that they are all carriers of a deadly and catching disease that not only cripples and blinds men, but that also dooms them to hell.

The other characters are equally grotesque, partly because McCullers fashioned them as human aberrations and partly because her story emphasizes those characteristics of their psyches that stamp them as lost souls. They lack even a Singer, who might, in silence, allow them to talk through pain and sorrow, or explain themselves to themsevles, or live private enthusiasms in words. Clearly a lost soul in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is Captain Penderton, an intellectual without virility. He represents a contrast to the powerful forces of the unconscious represented by Williams. Like other characters in the novel, he is caught in a trap from which there is no exit except through violence and death (Vickery 19). A repressed homosexual, Penderton has "within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes, and the active powers of neither" (8). When he married Leonora she was a virgin and after five days of conjugal efforts "her status was changed only enough to leave her somewhat puzzled" (11). He also has "a sad penchant for becoming enamoured of his wife's lovers" (8). Attracted now to Major Langdon, his neighbor and superior officer, he feels uneasy about Leonora's affair with Langdon, not so much because of jealousy, but because his "emotional regard for the Major ... was the nearest thing to love that he had ever known" (22). Thus, not surprising, Penderton's impotence and homosexual tendencies have alienated him from his wife, whose pleasures are primarily animalistic. Although Penderton is a scholarly man, the statistics and other information that he carries in his head—a knowledge, for

example, of the curious digestive apparatus of the lobster—are fundamentally irrelevant, and he is unable to make creative connections between the concepts he has grasped. He is a coward, and, in a subdued fashion, a kleptomaniac; more importantly, he is oriented toward death rather than life.

Captain Penderton's wife, Leonora, is as instinctual as Williams. A handsome woman who despises her husband, she fears "neither man, beast, nor the devil"—and God she has never known (11). She enjoys the pleasures of both the table and the bed, and is an excellent sportswoman, being especially keen on horses and riding. She is, however, said to be "a little feebleminded," (11) and "she always found it a little difficult to picture a situation that did not actually take place in the room with her" (67). This does not disturb her husband, who sees it as "a condition natural to all women under forty" and it serves only to increase the affection that her lover, Major Langdon, feels for her (12).

Two other characters, Langdon and his wife, Alison, are equally frozen in their solitary, separate worlds. They extend the cast of characters without adding redemptive personal qualities of any significance. Thus the critical charge that *Reflections in a Golden Eye* offers inadequate, or "flat," characters has some basis in fact. Langdon, for example, like Leonora, loves eating. He is a bluff and jovial man who is generally popular despite a certain boorishness. Healthy and insensitive, he is fond of sports and cardplaying. Culture means little to him. Leonora is far better suited to him temperamentally than is his wife, Alison. He seems, in sum, to represent a type that is obtuse to a pronounced degree: "only two things matter to me now," he comments after his wife's death. "To be a good animal and to serve my country" (79).

Alison Langdon is twenty-nine. Although she is two years younger than Leonora, her ill health and overly sensitive disposition are in contrast to Leonora' confident animality and relative obtuseness. Not only is Alison sick in body, however; she is also sick in mind. Afflicted with heart disease at an early age, she has been "tortured to the bone by grief and anxiety so that now she was on the verge of actual lunacy" (12). After she has lost a baby, and has become aware that her husband is having an affair with Leonora, she develops a pattern of neurotic behavior which culminates in self-mutilation: she cuts off her own nipples with a pair of garden shears. Chester Eisinger sees Alison's response as a normal one under the conditions: "Cut off from the vital sources of life from love, from motherhood, and from nature--she has neither the will nor the strength to survive" (254). This act has caused Alison so much shame that she is estranged now from self as well as others. Her self-mutilation is a physical act "symbolic of her psychic mutilation" (Eisinger 254). It is a symbol of frustrated love turned violently against oneself. Despite this signal of despair, her husband continues to deny her sympathy and understanding. For his own peace of mind he convinces himself first that her illnesses are merely products of her neurosis, having no physical basis. Her husband is described as looking "on her obvious unhappiness as something morbid and female, altogether outside his control" (25). He is a stupid and heartless man and husband.

Anacleto, the Langdons' Filipino houseboy, is the sixth and last of the novel's leading characters. A sprite-like creature, devoted to Alison and antagonistic to her husband, Major Langdon, Anacleto directs his malice toward the Major in mosquito-like fashion. Towards Alison the houseboy is all kindness and imagination. The strangely-assorted pair engage in many small rituals together, such as playing with Japanese paper flowers and listening to music; they dream of the day when they can go away together and begin a new life, perhaps by opening a linen-shop in Quebec, perhaps by operating a prawn-boat based in Moultrieville, on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina.

The cast of characters is completed by "Firebird," Leonora's horse, a fleshly personification of Leonora's sensuality and brute animality. The horse has once outraced his own sire, himself a champion. He has been viewed by some as a character in his own right because he has been endowed by McCullers with quasi-human qualities. For example, with Leonora, who trains him, he behaves "in much the same manner as a young husband" (18). When she addresses him, her voice is "vibrant with passion and excitement" (18).

The story itself is divided into four parts. In the opening portion, Williams is sent to Captain Penderton's house to help clear some bushes. He misinterprets his instructions, however, thus focusing Penderton's rage upon him. Inside the house, the captain then quarrels with his wife because she is not properly dressed to receive guests who are due to arrive shortly. Leonora reacts by stripping herself naked to taunt him. When he threatens to kill her, she turns to him unconcernedly and reduces him to silence by threatening to drag him out on the street, naked as she is, and thrash him. Later the guests, Major Langdon and his wife, arrive for dinner and a game of cards. Meanwhile, however, Williams, who has continued working outside the house, has seen Leonora naked. She is the first naked woman he has seen, and he is fascinated, remaining outside in the darkness until late.

In the second and third parts of the book, the plot gathers momentum as the relationships between the various characters are developed. The soldier returns to the house each evening to keep watch on those within, and especially to gaze at Leonora. Williams eventually breaks into the Penderton's house where, while everyone sleeps, he waits until dawn, gazing at the sleeping form of Leonora. In the third part, a series of climactic events befalls the main characters. Penderton, riding Leonora's horse rather than his usual mount, is thrown from the saddle. By coincidence, Williams, his own horse tethered nearby, has been sunbathing naked on a rock. Seeing Firebird, Williams leads the steed away, leaving the captain lying on the ground. Penderton, left behind in humiliation, is enveloped by a burning hatred for Williams. The day ends when Alison has a severe heart attack. Afterwards, Williams sneaks into Leonora's room to watch her while she sleeps. At other times of the day he becomes conscious of the fact that Penderton is following him regularly, for a reason that he does not know.

As the fourth and final part opens, Penderton's obsession with Williams becomes

even more intense. Alison, meanwhile, remains confined to her bed, having been informed by the doctor that her next heart attack will kill her. Passing a sleepless night, Alison sees a man enter the Penderton's house. She gets up and follows him. Entering Leonora's room she switches on the light and, to her amazement, sees Williams keeping watch over the sleeping Leonora. She knocks at Penderton's door, and tells him that he should go to his wife's room. Fearful that he may perhaps find Langdon there, Penderton avoids taking this action. Instead, he tells Alison that she is not herself and takes her home—where, to his relief, he finds Langdon awaiting her. The next morning it becomes generally known that Alison has lost her reason.

In the end, Alison dies, having gone to a sanatorium for her health; Langdon attaches himself to the Pendertons, almost like a third member of the family; and Penderton, discovering Williams in his wife's bedroom, kills the soldier.

All these strange occurrences are objectively presented without commentary by the artist. Psychological motivations of these aberrant characters are kept to a minimum (McDowell 53). None of the characters is able to displace himself long enough to recognize what is happening. They all fail to understand either themselves or the people around them. Thus, they all live in a state of moral isolation and "their deficiencies prevent them from realizing their humanity" (Eisinger 251-252). Simeon Smith also finds these characters deficient in that "no love is openly acknowledged" by them (38). These characters "appear to us more as shadows than people" (Cook 48); they are indeed "tiny" and "grotesque."

In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, what occurs is seen through the lens of observation and inspection without the illumination of speculation and explanation; in short, reflections without interpretations. The objectivity and controlled coolness of the style is in accord with the inevitability and bleakness of the vision. Form and content, in this regard, are well matched.

Speaking of the relationship between form and content, Carson McCullers once commented: "I think material should make its own form" (quoted in Hutchens, *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 June 1951, 2). In view of the conditions under which she wrote the book, it would seem that McCullers would have had little time for planning; and yet the work shows--either because of her innate musical sense or because the story had matured within her until it had, as it were, acquired the right proportions—a balance and a symmetry that suggest careful construction. The book is, indeed, as Smith says, "good story telling, brilliant in its craftsmanlike execution, hard, exact, and economical" (43). One can, even, with a measure of logic, define the structure of the book as having the pattern of "a double triangle or rhombus, the two triangles having one side in common"—the Langdon-Penderton axis—and grant that, at the story's beginning at least, the whole structure is "delicately balanced by impotence at either apex ... and excess or superfluity at the base formed of the flesh and the spirit." However, the figure becomes skewed as the story progresses, and the "instability of the figure is further impaired" by the frustration inflicted on Penderton and on Mrs. Langdon by their respective spouses (Smith 36-37).

Although th "double triangle or rhombus" is perhaps too literal, too geometric as a point of reference, it nevertheless provides a key to understanding the author's purpose. While their lives are in balance -precarious though that balance is- the six characters are divided evenly into two groups. The first consists of Leonora, Major Langdon, and Williams, all illustrating "the healthy principle of natural animality," while the second includes Penderton, Alison Langdon, and Anacleto, who are all "cut off entirely from the world of nature," and who represent "the cultivation of the mind and the arts" (Eisinger 252). The two groups cannot coexist, however; they are at war.

> Even though they are moored to their separate spheres of being, [they] destroy each other. No one succeeds in making himself whole, in borrowing from the other group what is lacking in his own personality. (Eisinger 252)

In effect, the novel is simpler in form than *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. It is, as well, more appropriately described as a short story or novella rather than a novel. It contains approximately 33,000 words. The spareness of the style, the simplicity of the structure, with the four movements carrying the tale swiftly to the appointed conclusion, suggest a well-played game of cards—solitaire, perhaps. Indeed, at the time of the book's first appearance, one reviewer, after referring to its as a *tour de force*, pointed out that

> The reader is never identified with anyone in the book; and it seems that the price of such perfection in having everything come out exact and even is that you have to play with a special deck of cards, deliberately leaving the hearts out of it. (Ferguson 317)

Reading *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, one senses that the book represents, structually and esthetically, a kind of game. The feeling is reinforced by the evident spontaneity with which it was written, a spontaneity that permits one to believe McCullers' statement that she did indeed write it to "do something for fun," and to achieve "lingual joy" (Smith 33). One indication that this was indeed the case was her declaration in the course of a conversation at West Point many years later, in 1962: "From the first paragraph I just knew it was going to be fun. I didn't know who was going to shoot who [*sic*] when I wrote that first paragraph" (cited in Smith 34). As for "lingual joy," one experiences the same sense of triumph that comes from deciphering a crossword puzzle when one comes across a passage in the second part of the novel. Here Williams, representing the forces of animality, stands in a trance-like state, staring into the distance long after Leonora and her horse have vanished from his sight. His sergeant approaches him and roars good-naturedly: "Hey, Unconscious, you mean to gawk there forever?" (19) One senses the ironic McCullers is smiling.

Tension is inherent in the book's structure as a result of the continuing interaction between the physical and the spiritual. It becomes clear that the relatively shallow

intelligence of Penderton and of Alison Langdon is not only balanced by the animality and feebleminded tendencies of their spouses, but also provides support for a more complex pattern in which Alison's association with Anacleto, on the one side, is counterbalanced by Penderton's love-hate relationship with Williams on the other. Thus, as Frank Baldanza points out, "The clear structural division of the theme into animalistic love and spiritual love strikingly recalls, of course, the myth of the two pairs of horses pulling the chariot of the soul in [Plato's] *Phaedrus*" (158).

In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, McCullers further develops the themes of love and of loneliness, or alienation evident in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. But the themes are treated in a more detached and pessimistic fashion. To a considerable degree this increment of pessimism may have been due to personal factors. When she was writing the book, her marriage with Reeves McCullers was approaching a breaking point. Love, indeed, is less in evidence in this book than is alienation. Physical love, as we have seen, is represented by the Leonora-Langdon axis, as spiritual love is represented by the Alison-Anacleto alliance. But the Penderton-Williams connection, which presumably could have balanced the stability of the rhombidal structure of the novel, was not to be established, but instead turned in upon itself and produced destruction.

The inevitability of tragedy is underscored, however, by the fact that Williams was as unlikely to return Penderton's passion for him as the young soldier in D. H. Lawrence's *The Prussian Officer* was disposed to change his girl friend for his own sadistic captain. The parallels between the two stories have frequently been remarked, (Smith 40; Evans, *The Ballad of Carson McCullers* 60) and McCullers could hardly have failed to be influenced by Lawrence's work. Yet where Lawrence's tale reveals a brutal simplicity, McCullers' story has a sensibility, a complexity and an occasional sense of humor that clearly distinguish it from its "predecessor."

At the end of the book, Alison is dead, after glimpsing the horror of life relected in the peacock's golden eye; Anacleto is carried away into nothingness; Penderton is destroyed; Williams is murdered; and only Leonora and a harried Langdon are left to continue their uninspired and habitual affair. If love is doomed, alienation must become dominant. No hope appears that any of the characters can escape from the isolation of the individual personality, that spirit and flesh can unite in one creative and productive whole.

Herein lies a principal difference between *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Love is doomed in both novels, but it has begun to succumb on the first page of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*--if it ever recognizably exists. The series of incidents that move the story toward the culmination in murder is unrelieved, bitter, devoid of all positive emotion and nearly all humor, and of all pathos in the end. The balance between love and ultimate loneliness and alienation that gave poignancy and credibility to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is lacking in McCullers' second novel to what must be termed an oppressive degree. One would not insist that the novelist inject the wholesome or the positive to make ultimate tragedy palatable or believable; but the penalty for exclusive use of the *outré* and the dire in a novel

whose field of resolution is the human spirit is obviously rejection--popular or critical or both.

Clearly, selection of characters and subject matter must remain the author's business. But where "the characters are not great people to begin with, and they gain little compassion in the telling," (Smith 46) the reader has the right to question the net impression of a work of art. For art must reach an audience or it remains a shout in the void, satisfying perhaps to the audience of one but unrelated to the discriminating masses. "The revelation of sadomasochism in the military" (Smith 41) has nothing to do with it; the question of acceptability turns, in the last analysis, on whether sadomasochism or homosexuality, or deviation of normalcy *per se*, of any stripe or degree, can be rendered humanly appealing. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* fails in this regard.

From a critical point of view, one can question, finally, whether McCullers, "Taking a single account of voyeurism and homicide on an Army post, ... revealed the subrational, indeed irrational, natures of the individuals involved, and came up with a whole truth concerning mankind" (Smith 42). That claim could more logically be made for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and its penetrating examination of the human heart, human illusions, and human motivations. Yet, one cannot deny the fact that *Reflections in a Golden Eye* constitutes an important step in McCullers' artistic growth. That growth, hinging on her fearless attempts to deal with the sense of the awful that she genuinely felt, involved development of artistic power and human sensibility, and resulted in the creation of one equally memorable work, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (Tseng, "Failure of Love" 151-160).

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