

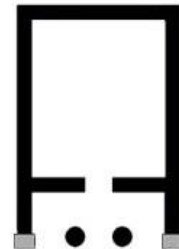
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Absurd Perseverance in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

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This essay argues that Carson McCullers's 1940 *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* renders suicide as a banal and ineffective response to an unassailable condition of alienation. In so doing, the text celebrates the perseverance of characters who continue living while simultaneously dismissing the possibility of disrupting such isolation through a self-orchestrated death. This extolling of survival and concurrent securing of a dominant social order of alienation, I argue, realises and problematises the logic of Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Scholarship on McCullers has tended to emphasise, as Sarah Gleeson-White proposes, 'alienation, loneliness, a lack of human communication, and the failure of love'.¹ This critical focus is, however, limited. 'Although there is no denying the validity of these constructions of the southern grotesque', Gleeson-White continues, 'I do not think they tell the full story'.² In conjunction with this isolation and despondency, what Melissa Free distils as the 'lonely, alienated, queer characters [of McCullers's writing] whose feelings, fears, and desires are conveyed through silence', I suggest, with Gleeson-White, that there needs to be an acknowledgement of hope.³ Darren Millar refers to these more optimistic turns in McCullers's writing as 'utopian potential'.⁴ I propose, though, that the full story of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the 'loneliness and desertion' stressed by critics such as Laurie Champion alongside the utopianism argued by Millar, leads to an unresolvable tension.⁵

The alienation in McCullers's work echoes what Simon Critchley defines as 'the profound limitedness of the human condition, [...] our frailty and separateness from one another'.⁶ Critchley goes on to suggest that overcoming this division in absolute terms is an unfeasible yet essential endeavor; it is 'the double bind at the heart of the human condition' and 'the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of complete communication'.⁷ I propose that McCullers's novel renders an absurd hope, in which the despair of isolation is inevitable and yet, due to this very certainty, survival and the striving for a utopia of complete communication becomes a heroic revolt.

¹ Sarah Gleeson-White, 'Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers', *Southern Literary Review*, 33(2), (2001), 108-123, p. 109.

² *ibid.*

³ Melissa Free, 'Relegation and Rebellion: the Queer, the Grotesque, and the Silent in the Fiction of Carson McCullers', *Studies in the Novel*, 40(4), (2008), 426-446, p. 426.

⁴ Darren Millar, 'The Utopian Function of Affect in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 41(2), (2009), 87-105, p. 88.

⁵ Laurie Champion, 'Black and White Christs in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 24(1), (1991), 47-52, p. 51.

⁶ Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 32-33.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 134.

Camus describes this type of heroic living: 'The absurd is his extreme tension which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth which is defiance'.⁸ This truth, or reason to be, is registered and defined by Camus through the repudiation of voluntary death. He uses the story of Sisyphus to suggest that the only philosophically justifiable response to the proposition of suicide is to reject it and continue with 'a confrontation [between individual human and world] and an unceasing struggle'.⁹ He argues that finding a fundamental meaning to life, or a resolution to the absurd human condition, is impossible but that the task itself, living, still has purpose. Specifically, 'revolt gives life its value'.¹⁰ It is persevering against an insurmountable challenge, like Sisyphus compelled for eternity to push a boulder up a mountain and watch it roll back down, that provides life with value. In essence, challenging the impossibility of finding a meaning to life by continuing regardless in a day-to-day revolt is a meaning for living. Survival is, then, an ongoing end in itself. The permanence of this confrontation, its unceasing nature, though, entails an insurmountable boundary. There can only be revolt with no revolution.

Camus describes voluntary death as an acquiescence to meaninglessness or a failure to take part in the struggle for purpose. However, this struggle is engendered by the presupposition that self-killing is ineffective. If Camus allowed suicide to be a viable response to absurdity, then the confrontation would no longer be constant and the meaningfulness of revolt undermined. He evades this problem by asserting that, due to the very unceasing nature of the struggle, voluntary death cannot be considered reasonable. In a circular, self-reflexive line of reasoning, Camus gives life a value of perseverance, or survival, because suicide is ineffective, which in turn limits the potential for disruption and stabilises a conception of reality as an unceasing revolt. Thus, the futility of self-killing is reinforced by the very unassailability of the state of being that the impotency of self-death itself establishes. I suggest McCullers enacts a similar Sisyphean structure within her novel by rendering self-killing as an ineffectual response to a social condition of alienation. Loneliness is not only an insurmountable boundary interminably revolted against in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, but also a logical necessity for sustaining the text's banalisation of suicide. In this manner, the celebration of survival by repudiating voluntary death is problematised, as the revolt of living is realised to be as futile as suicide.

McCullers's novel is split into three parts and five narrative voices. The text itself likens its structure to that of a wheel, where '[e]ach person addressed his words mainly to the mute [protagonist]. Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the centre hub'.¹¹ The five narrative subjects are: Mick Kelly, a young girl becoming a woman; Biff Brannon, a recently widowed café owner; Dr Copeland, a black Marxist doctor; Jake Blount, a white Marxist or anarchist agitator; and John Singer, a deaf mute. Singer is the hub, the formative figure of the novel around which the 'spokes'—Mick, Biff, Copeland, and

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 53.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 187. Henceforth cited in text as (*H*, page number).

Blount—live and interact. I will reverse this construction by first analysing Singer’s own narrative, before expanding out to the other characters and their reactions to Singer’s suicide. Briefly, I will turn to McCullers’s authorial outline of her novel to draw out how the extolling of survival and perseverance functions as an ordering principle, or the premise around which the text and the events within it are organised. I will then conclude by returning to Sisyphus and suggesting that Camus’s and McCullers’s models of society leave us either compelled to reiterate perpetual failure, or insecure, without a stable definition of what success and failure are, and thus without the possibility of an anchored purpose.

Singer’s Suicide

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter opens with an image that draws attention to the central preoccupations of Singer’s narrative, the limits of expression and his love for Antonapoulos:

In the town there were two mutes and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work. The two friends were very different (H, 7).

The fact that the pair are arm in arm, live in the same house, and are always together implies a bond closer than friendship. Opening the novel with two mutes brings early focus to the challenges of communication, which are exacerbated when the closeness of the pair is destabilised by the conflicting description that they were very different.

Following this image, the central tension between Singer and Antonapoulos is made all the more clear: ‘Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter’ (H, 8). The fact that Antonapoulos’s comprehension does not matter disturbs the sense of a balanced relationship. Just as every other character will speak to Singer primarily for their own personal gain, Singer uses Antonapoulos in what McCullers describes in her outline for the novel as a ‘repository for his most personal feelings and ideas’.¹² Michael C. Smith details the uncomfortable nature of this unequal association:

On the surface [Singer] seems to be compassionate and attentive to others; he looks after Antonapoulos and later in the novel visits him at the asylum before finally being driven to suicide by the Greek’s death. But as the novel progresses, the reasons for Singer’s actions become increasingly suspect. He is drawn to Antonapoulos for essentially selfish reasons. The Greek, because he is a moron as well as a mute, can neither understand nor question Singer. Thus Antonapoulos is the perfect vehicle for Singer to use in creating a dream world of imagined communication. He ‘talks’ to his friend in sign language unconcerned that Antonapoulos does not understand. His lack of comprehension simply ‘did not matter’ to Singer, who sings for no one but himself.¹³

¹² Carson McCullers, ‘Author’s Outline of “The Mute” (Later Published as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*)’, in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. by Margarita G. Smith (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), pp. 124-148, p. 125.

¹³ Michael C. Smith, “‘A Voice in a Fugue’: Characters and Musical Structure in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25(2), (1979), 258-263, p. 260.

There is a reversal here of the relationships Singer has with the other characters of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, in which he is the repository. It seems too reductive, though, to define all these associations as driven by selfishness. Singer tries desperately to elicit responses from Antonapoulos, and this perseverance in such an impossible endeavour manifests his affection. Antonapoulos's inability to comprehend and react to Singer's efforts then lead, as Smith suggests, to the creation of a dream world of imagined communication. Singer's intentions may be positive but their realisation is problematic. He encloses himself in an unbalanced, exclusive, and idealised relationship. Eventually, his fantasised perfect vehicle falters, the dream ends, and he responds to this loss by killing himself.

This violence suggests a deep feeling of dependency, which is elucidated in the letters Singer writes to Antonapoulos but destroys before sending. The most prominent of these missives is both a love letter and, with hindsight, a suicide note. Singer confesses: 'The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear' [sic.], a point he repeats and emphasises: 'I am not meant to be alone and without you who understands' (*H*, 191). This letter is one of the early indications that Singer's passion is overwhelming and his world overly-reliant on a closed and inequitable relationship based on an inability to coherently communicate. Indeed, the incoherence within this relationship provides Singer with a Sisyphean task: to establish and express a shared love with Antonapoulos. Singer's confession also implies his control in discursively shaping Antonapoulos as someone who understands.

Singer takes this dominance further through physical interactions with his friend. Beyond feeding Antonapoulos whenever he can, Singer buys him clothes and dresses him with myth: 'Sitting motionless in his bright, rich garments he seemed like some wise king from a legend' (*H*, 196). He decorates Antonapoulos into the image that he longs for. By actively rejecting memories in which his friend does not conform to this vision of a wise king Singer only vaguely imagines, 'the Antonapoulos whom he alone could know. This was the friend to whom he told all that was in his heart' (*H*, 180). Just as Copeland tries to use his children, as Jake tries to use Willie, as Mick uses Bubber, as Biff quarrels with his own thoughts of Mick, Singer moulds Antonapoulos into his own wish fulfilment. There is a sense of parental ownership echoed across these relationships, which is exacerbated by Antonapoulos's childlike mental capacities. Singer's love is, as such, misdirected into a controlling relationship of somebody who is incapable of looking after themselves. He assumes a reciprocation that he justifies by creating his own Antonapoulos, the one whom he alone could know. Singer's problem, as the text expounds, is a 'love unchecked by criticism' (*H*, 282).

This unchecked love is inevitably disrupted when the deteriorating health of Antonapoulos ends in his death. Singer's response of suicide, though, still comes as a shock:

Singer left his luggage in the middle of the station floor. Then he walked to the shop. He greeted the jeweller for whom he worked with a listless turn of his hand. When he went out again there was something heavy in his pocket. For a while he rambled with bent head along the streets. But the unrefracted brilliance of the sun, the humid heat, oppressed him. He returned to his room with swollen eyes and aching head. After resting he drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ash tray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest (*H*, 286).

While in the text this moment is relatively sudden, Singer is described as having given some thought to his final action. He may leave his luggage in the middle of the floor but this suggests he has no intention of coming back. He then takes the time to purchase the gun and to ramble. He even washes the ashtray and glass. This patience implies that the shot to the chest, the heart, has been considered. Singer typically wants ‘to talk to Antonapoulos of all the thoughts that had ever been in his mind and heart’ (*H*, 13). This classic separation of organs suggests that the mind is representative of logic while the heart represents emotion; Singer’s decision to shoot the symbolic location of his passion, is, then, a sentimental act.¹⁴ It is the emotional loss of Antonapoulos, as opposed to a reasoned reaction to his newfound alienation, which drives Singer towards suicide. Unlike the myth described by Camus, Singer’s Sisyphean task of forging a coherent relationship with Antonapoulos ends, and at this point he seems to come to terms with this loss through his own death.

David Foster Wallace, in his speech ‘This is Water’, argues: ‘It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master’.¹⁵ For Singer, the master is not his mind but his heart and the overflow of love that he feels for Antonapoulos. His inability to manage his ardour leads directly to the misapprehension of his friend. This passion enclosed in a binary, love based relationship where communication is rarely straightforward results in a sentimental death. A traditional construction of suicide is thus recalled as Singer’s self-killing evokes the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, as well as Werther ‘the turbulent heart’.¹⁶ There is little doubt as to why Singer kills himself. It is a moment of violence explicitly and then implicitly justified as an act of love, through his letters, the timing of his death, and the bullet to the chest.

The reason for Singer’s suicide is distilled by the most perceptive character in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Biff. Early in the novel, following the death of his wife, Biff asks himself: ‘Why? Why was it that in cases of real love the one who is left does not more often follow the beloved by suicide?’ (*H*, 111). Singer’s self-killing is a realisation of such ‘real love’. His desire is so concentrated on a single individual that Antonapoulos’s death is also his own end. Such violence undermines this traditional, binary conception of ‘real love’ by manifesting it in a cycle of self-destruction. It is a love which is elicited by suicide. Singer’s violating but affectionate control of an individual incapable of living independently, his ‘real love’ and the problems of communication engendering it, is ultimately rendered as self-destructive. In this manner, Singer’s death provides closure to his exclusive and unequal relationship with Antonapoulos. The final section of the novel then continues this reproval of Singer’s choices by emphasising the ineffectual nature of his death while also presenting an alternative kind of

¹⁴ McCullers’s outline indicates that she originally planned for Singer to have a quiet death by gas. The change in how the suicide is executed suggests it has specific relevance. See McCullers, *Mortgaged*, p. 125.

¹⁵ David Foster Wallace, ‘This is Water’, Kenyon Commencement Address 2005. <<https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>>. [Accessed 20 April 2018].

¹⁶ This quote is from Émile Durkheim describing the protagonist of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). See Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. by George Simpson, trans. by John A. Spaulding (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 249.

love through Platonic polyamory,¹⁷ or, an impossible form of universal communication that bridges 'the profound limitedness of the human condition'.

Absurd Hunters

I suggest in the concluding part of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, perseverance offers a form of closure. McCullers repeatedly emphasised in her outline of the novel:

This book will be complete in all of its phases. No loose ends will be left dangling and at the close there will be a feeling of balanced completion. The fundamental idea of the book is ironic—but the reader is not left with a sense of futility. The book reflects the past and also indicates the future.¹⁸

This sense of completeness suggests a feeling of resolution. However, at the same time, McCullers implies that such settling is not an endpoint, as the text also indicates 'the future'. She goes on to identify how this 'cohesive finality' will be expressed through the character of Biff;¹⁹ '[i]n the last few pages he threads through the details of the story and arrives at the most salient points. [...] His reflections bring the book to a close with a final, objective roundness'.²⁰ While there are changes between McCullers's outline and the published novel, this emphasis on the ending and Biff providing a rounded conclusion remains. 'Roundness' again indicates more than an endpoint. I propose this counter-intuitive conclusive roundness is realised in a perseverance that offers both closure and continuance. By maintaining hopes for polyamory and social progression, even against the unassailability of McCullers's alienating world, the surviving characters of the novel are resolved as they take on an absurdly heroic struggle into the future. It is this Sisyphean task of surviving in revolt, or of continuing a cycle of perseverance, which forms the ordering principle or 'thread' that Biff appeals to in order to bring the book to a close.

The last of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*'s three parts is the shortest and is set two months after Singer's suicide. McCullers here expresses the divisibility and separation of her various storylines by giving a solitary chapter to each character set during different periods of a day. This temporal and structural atomisation is exacerbated when both Blount and Copeland leave the town entirely. Such isolation, which has pervaded the text, is negotiated in this final section of the novel through the various reactions to Singer's death. Biff brings focus to the central concern raised by the assorted relationships with Singer: 'The thing that mattered was the way Blount and Mick made of him a sort of home-made God' (*H*, 204). This process of reinventing Singer is a communally shared yet individually distinct practice, whereby '[e]ach man described the mute as he wished him to be' (*H*, 197). For everyone in the town, but particularly

¹⁷ With this phrase, I am referring to a concept of idealised, universal, non-romantic love that is expressed by McCullers in terms of 'human struggle' and various desires for social progress. While this need not be a linguistic collective, it implies a synchronised understanding, which would enact and enable complete communication.

¹⁸ McCullers, *Mortgaged*, p. 148.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 137.

Mick, Jake, and Copeland, Singer becomes an embodied wish fulfilment as someone that they construct in their own image. The death of this home-made God could then be expected to be a disruptive, revolutionary event. However, the text deflates such possibilities as the reactions to the suicide are, ironically, muted. In the final part of the novel each of the major surviving characters in turn reacts to the death of Singer not in despair but in momentary grief before reasserting the values they have held throughout the text. There is, then, a sense of conclusive roundness as they decide to persevere.

Dr Copeland's passion is a marked counterpoint to that of Singer. His life is directed by a love that extends beyond any one individual into a desire for progress for his race. Copeland had estranged his children as they did not believe in what he repeatedly describes as 'the strong, true purpose' (*H*, 66). His love, which is not universal, is distorted into anger and violence as he pushes his family away. However, this progressive desire for social improvement still sustains him. At the end of the novel he is dying from TB but will be reunited with his children. Within this reunion there is the potential for Copeland to overcome the discord with his family. This disharmony, much like Singer's unbalanced relationship with Antonopoulos, stems from the challenges of communication: 'He wanted to speak to his son, but he could think of nothing to say' (*H*, 81). Indeed, the inability to express himself dominates Copeland's narrative:

How much that he had said today was understood? How much would be of any value? He recalled the words he had used, and they seemed to fade and lose their strength. The words left unsaid were heavier on his heart. They rolled up to his lips and fretted them. The faces of his suffering people moved in a swelling mass before his eyes. And as he steered the automobile slowly down the street his heart turned with this angry, restless love (*H*, 175).

Copeland's angry, restless love is mishandled and misdirected as it separates him from his family and overwhelms him to the point that he cannot express himself effectively. It does, though, give his life a seemingly endless purpose and a hope that is absent for Singer. Copeland's desire for communication is a Sisyphean struggle as he can find no language to impart his true purpose, yet he continues to seek out a definitive articulation. As such, he has, unlike Singer, a reason to persevere unceasingly.

The end of Copeland's narrative returns him to this endeavour of conveying his strong, true purpose. The key terms of growth, swelling of his heavy heart, and a lack of strength are repeated as he feels desperate to speak but cannot communicate:

He felt the fire in him and he could not be still. He wanted to sit up and speak in a loud voice – yet when he tried to raise himself he could not find the strength. The words in his heart grew big and they would not be silent. But the old man had ceased to listen and there was no one to hear him (*H*, 293).

This moment of passion unsatisfied, which has echoed time and again in Copeland's narrative, is also the end of his story. There is, however, a sense of hopeful continuity in this repetition. Even while approaching death, Copeland retains his fire and persists with his search for a language to express himself cogently.

This sense of absurd struggle continues into the story of Jake Blount. Blount's political philosophy is unclear and varies from strike action to anarchistic violence. As Biff points out, '[t]here were many things about the fellow that seemed contrary' (*H*, 18). Where Copeland reiterates the phrase 'strong, true purpose', Blount repeatedly returns to the concept of 'those who know' (*H*, 25). Both of these ambiguous phrases are used to identify an understanding of society as uneven and ordered. Blount is more concerned with class disparities than Copeland's racial focus. In both cases, though, they envision society as having an unjust, hierarchical organisation which is best challenged through collective action.

The core problem for Copeland and Blount is their inability to convey their understanding and thereby form a coherent collective. When they meet, it is the failure of language which brings forth their discomfort with each other: 'As the silence grew longer the tenseness between them became more strained' (*H*, 264). Their reliance on the seemingly inexpressible feelings of 'purpose' and 'know[ing]' results in a discussion that cannot mediate the question of '[w]hat must be done' (*H*, 264). Their Sisyphean task, as such, is to cross this seemingly unbridgeable gap in their communication. As Blount confesses, '[n]o matter what I say I can't seem to make them [anyone] see the truth' (*H*, 118). Copeland's and Blount's repeated phrases imply that the task of self-definition is unending since the explicatory language the men require seems unrealisable. The conviction, though, of persevering by repeating these nebulous phrases asserts an absurd hopefulness.

Blount's final section begins with a race riot, although it is a fight in which 'each man was for himself' (*H*, 295). While the riot is loaded with complex connotations in the context of the South, these are quickly destabilised and dispersed by the descent into individualistic violence. The implication, then, is that rather than a racial conflict, it is egocentricity which is being challenged here. As in Singer's narrative, individualism is brought to a critical juncture. The breakdown of the race riot from a group-based confrontation to an atomised and anarchic chaos underscores the foundering social bonds explored throughout the novel. This collapse of order is highlighted by Blount as he yells for the police before joining in the violence. Eventually, he leaves the fight unsure whether he has killed a man. This uncertainty, and the tendency for several characters, but particularly Blount and Copeland, to at once appeal to the need for collective organisation while simultaneously stressing their own individual authority, draws attention to the sense of struggle dominating their lives. Their failure to overcome this tension by forging sustained social connections, or by finding a language with which to express themselves fully, evinces a Sisyphean task. The problems Blount and Copeland face are ongoing, yet this very impossibility of overcoming enables an alternative resolution of perseverance.

After this dramatic fight, Blount comes to terms with Singer's death. Just as he has always done, Blount leaves town and continues his vagrant travelling as a political agitator. Before leaving, though, he visits Biff who, unsolicited, gives him forty dollars. The explanation for this present is simply because Biff is, as Blount states, 'a right decent guy' (*H*, 301). This expression of friendship through gift-giving contrasts the sense of alienation pervading the novel. Biff and Blount's connection manifests a sense of community. However, this bond is only realised through its concurrent breakdown, as the gift is inextricable from Blount leaving.

The hopeful possibilities that are implicit if overwhelmed in Copeland's narrative become explicit, yet still unrealisable, in Blount's departure:

[H]e was going. All was to begin another time. The road ahead lay to the north and slightly to the west. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing. There was hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form (*H*, 304-5).

Blount looks forward with absurd optimism for his community, the South, while recognising that nothing has yet changed and it will all begin, again, another time.

Blount's leaving is followed by Mick's arrival at the café. Mick's narrative has a steady trajectory formed by the disintegration of childhood dreams. Everything of her youth, from her clothes, to how often she hears music, to her desires, slowly fade. Singer's death does not disrupt this trend. In fact, it is while he is living that Singer catalyses the premature ending of adolescence for Mick. Her family is in financial trouble and there is the opportunity of her being employed with the caveat that she would leave school at fourteen. The family rejects the idea, but Mick is keen to help. In the final moments of consideration, she feels she requires Singer's advice and authorisation. With little thought he tells her to take the job. Mick's desire to help her family and their wish to protect her again invokes a social-consciousness that Singer lacks.

At the end of the novel, Mick sits after work with a chocolate sundae and a beer, still blurring between childhood and adulthood but tired and jaded from professional life. While the scene, when set against the youthful vibrancy with which Mick had been introduced in the novel, is bleak, there is still a sense of absurd optimism:

But the store hadn't asked her to take the job. So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

All right!

O.K.!

Some good (*H*, 308).

Mick recognises a social component to her position when she suggests there was nobody to take it out on. Her musical ambition is more self-centred than Copeland's or Blount's revolutionary ideals, but it still indicates a desire for social progress. The specifics of this sense of progression are ill-defined for all of McCullers's characters. Indeed, the inability to define such challenges and the options to overcome them helps engender their unassailability. However, Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Biff all envision a more contented future through some

form of collective organisation. Mick, for instance, looks to her community to buttress her desires and associates her job with whether 'anything made sense'. As such, she seems to hope that meaning can be made by the society in which she lives. She then resolves to persevere with this belief. Her repetition of 'it was some good', though, acts as an admission that the ordering of meaning by her society can only be sustained by reiteration. Here, Camus's absurd logic, in which repetition is confounded with absolute truth, comes to the fore as a means of asserting hope in a hopeless situation. By re-affirming their principles at the end of the novel Copeland, Blount, and Mick perform a form of revolt. The assertive manner of this performance is implied, as with Sisyphus's task of forever pushing a boulder, to be meaningful in and of itself precisely because failure is inevitable. Mick's ambition to be a pianist only retains value so long as she continues to believe, in the face of contrary evidence, that her society may someday recall and realise her dream.

For all three of these individuals—Copeland, Blount, and Mick—Singer's death enables only continuity. Against the negative feelings engendered by his suicide there is a repeating sense of absurd hope. This optimism, though, is established by the characters not being destabilised by the self-killing. Instead, they reassert their ideals as they have lived them throughout the text. These hopes take the form of contending with unassailable challenges. Copeland and Blount cannot bridge the fissure between their feelings and their capacity to express themselves, while Mick cannot avoid growing older. All three characters repeatedly fail to manifest their desires, yet they continue trying. As such, these endings elicit unrealisable optimism against despairing conditions. In direct opposition to Singer's decision to kill himself, Mick, Copeland, and Blount choose to persevere regardless of their consistent failures and the insurmountable problems they face.

The final chapter encapsulates this absurd hope by expanding social love into universal terms through Biff. Biff's uniqueness is realised both in the nature of his narrative, through his inquisitive scrutiny of himself and all the other characters, as well as in explicit statements from Singer. Singer describes him as 'a thoughtful one' (*H*, 190). Elsewhere, he explicates: 'the New York Café owner is different—he is not just like the others. [...] He watches. The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love' (*H*, 189). Biff takes on the role of an analyst trying to study and interpret events. He experiments with alternative practices and ideas; for instance, by wearing perfume and by trying to understand the 'freaks' that frequent his bar (*H*, 23). This perspective is broad and drives Biff's understanding of love not of 'something' but as a universal potential. At the end of the novel he provides his solution to '[t]he riddle. The question that had taken root in him and would not let him rest. The puzzle of Singer and the rest of them' (*H*, 311). This positioning of Biff as investigator enables him to articulate a more coherent repudiation of Singer's suicide.

In the final passages of the novel, Biff finds himself in a state of conflict that is associated with living. This discord develops from an all-embracing love being caught against a dark potential future. He resolves this tension in a way that suicide cannot:

[I]n a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valour. And of those who labour and of those who—one word—love. [...] He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away.

‘Louis!’ he called ‘Louis! Louis!’

Again there was no answer. But, motherofgod, was he a sensible man or was he not? And how could this terror throttle him like this when he didn’t even know what caused it? And would he just stand here like a jittery ninny or would he pull himself together and be reasonable? For after all *was* he a sensible man or was he not? [...] Somehow he remembered that the awning had not yet been raised. As he went to the door his walk gained steadiness. And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun.²¹

Biff’s resolution is to be ‘sensible’, sober, and to live regardless. He evaluates suicide by arguing for its opposite: continued existence. Biff recognises ‘a future of blackness, error and ruin’, and, as in Camus’s understanding, this sense of continuing suffering seems inevitable. The Second World War looms over the novel, particularly with references to Mussolini and Hitler, and Biff appears to be engaging with this sense of global fear. However, he also, with greater explicitness than the other characters, finds radiance against this darkness. This light is rendered through social-consciousness in the form of ‘human struggle’. Biff’s suspension is one that looks forwards, the past is narrow and the future wide, and as such is associated not with death but with living. This emphasis on living, alongside the seeming inevitability of a bleak future, stresses the present, much as Camus underscores Sisyphus’s awareness of his most immediate feelings.²² It is Biff, not Singer, who explores the tensions underlying the novel. His response to the lack of an answer, both to his call for Louis and his interrogation of life, is to persevere. Like Copeland, Blount, and Mick, Biff envisions a form of collective organisation that could provide a coherent sense of value. In a similar construction to Camus’s reading of Sisyphus’s revolt, Biff implies the struggle for love could be meaningful in and of itself.

Darren Millar defines this sense of optimism in McCullers’s writing:

The presence of so many dreamers under one sky is a sign of untapped utopian potential which the failure of each individual only seems to emphasize. [...] [T]his utopian vision] is attuned to the social potential inherent in the collective, even while it seems to insist on the tragedy that besets individuals.²³

I argue, though, that rather than an untapped utopia, which intimates a possibility of significant change, McCullers delineates an absurd hopefulness. The difference between these definitions is found in the emphasis placed on failure. Key to the absurd construction is that value derives from continuance, and thus failure is necessary to ensure an ongoing task. The final image of

²¹ McCullers, *Heart*, p. 312. Emphasis in original.

²² See Camus, p. 117.

²³ Millar, p. 88.

McCullers's novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), that of a 'sombre and joyful' chain-gang singing, encapsulates this sense of unrealisable optimism:

And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.²⁴

The collective as Millar observes, and as Biff's conception of human struggle implies, once again emerges here as a positive image. This hopeful communality is, though, restricted by the fact that these are prisoners. The stressed 'mortal' condition also emphasises the inevitability of ending and that this vision of collective understanding is only brief. I suggest that McCullers renders a specifically living friction between radiance and darkness. In other words, both hope and despair are found in a conflicted present, which cannot be overcome as this tension is the defining state of being alive. As such, perseverance provides conclusiveness through the affirmation of perpetual revolt against this unresolvable condition.

Sisyphus Disrupted

Convictions are not challenged by Singer's death; instead, they are reasserted. His suicide does not disturb the other characters because it is not the past but the present and future that is troubling. The gaze of those that survive *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is fixed on the seemingly unattainable goal of social progress. Even though Copeland is dying, Jake is a solitary vagrant, Mick is losing her childhood, and Biff is suspended, they all cling to an absurd hope. Singer's enclosed worldview through a limited and isolating 'real love' separates him from this possibility of continuance. His suicide provides a moment of closure through the death of the home-made God and the end of his problematic, control-based relationship with Antonapoulos. It does not, though, offer any revision to the base state of alienation and the desire for a Platonic polyamory; or, an impossible, idealised, collective understanding in which communication becomes seamless. Indeed, in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, such isolation is a necessary condition to provide McCullers's characters with a reason to be. Purpose is found in the text through the unceasing and unrealisable effort to overcome loneliness through a coherent expression of shared meaning. It is then due to the very impossibility of surmounting this alienation that such a *raison d'être* becomes an absurd, heroic determination, or a celebrated truth of defiance.

This extolling of survival in the novel is engendered through a dismissal of the disruptive potential of suicide. Singer's decision to shoot himself in the chest is represented as a private, sentimental act, which has little lasting impact on the text's other protagonists. By being emotionally affected but not effected by Singer's death, these characters imply that suicide is a moment of comprehensible closure evidencing the futility of self-killing. There appears, then, to be an impasse where social conditions are necessarily permanent in order for there to be a value system that sustains this rendering of suicide as ineffectual and unreasonable. In *The*

²⁴ Carson McCullers, 'The Ballad of the Sad Café', in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (London: Penguin, 1963), pp. 7-85, pp. 84-5.

Heart is a Lonely Hunter, this dead end is an unassailable condition of alienation, the insurmountable nature of which is, counter-intuitively, both realised and masked by the celebration of an unceasing struggle against it. However, for all McCullers's exposition of absurd hopefulness, her novel is still troubled by the suicide at its core. By dying, Singer ceases his struggle.

While *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* presents a resolution of perseverance as a response to Singer's suicide, the self-killing of the deaf-mute still indicates an alternative reaction to the state of alienation. Singer ends his struggle by abandoning life. This autonomous rejection of being alive elicits an independent self-determining authority, which challenges the condition of alienation by refusing to take part in it, or, indeed, to continue existing at all. At the same time, such voluntary death reaffirms a fundamental separation between people as it manifests the impossibility of complete communication by engendering an unbridgeable fissure between individuals through death. Completed suicide can only be registered as an act executed by other people, which is clouded under the overwhelming, unknowable absence that is death.²⁵ As such, the potential for a permanent, stable, and universal value system within which to evaluate suicide as always unreasonable is undermined by the act of self-killing itself. The resolution of persevering with an unceasing struggle is problematised when Singer chooses to end his life. His death terminates his struggle and, simultaneously, enacts a separation between people in a manner that is irreparable. The challenge of overcoming alienation is thus realised as being one potentially ended through an autonomous death, and yet such fundamental isolation is still rendered inevitable in living by this very act of suicide. This paradox, I propose, recalls Camus's assertion that the 'one truly serious philosophical problem [...] [is] judging whether life is or is not worth living'.²⁶

McCullers's characters' inability to cogently express themselves and the absolute, unrecoverable separation enacted through suicide, results in a fragmentation between people which renders a universal context impossible. As such, any conclusive response to the question of whether or not to die cannot be secured. McCullers and Camus justify their celebrations of perseverance by asserting that a futile life is preferable to a futile death. I argue, though, that when neither the choices to live or to die can overcome an insurmountable challenge, be it finding a meaning to life or alienation, then such a resolution is invariably insecure. In either Biff's or Singer's cases, and the decisions to persevere or kill oneself, the separateness of the human condition remains an impasse. It then follows that neither choice is inherently more reasonable. Unlike in the myth of Sisyphus, there is no recognisable authority or universal framework of understanding which compels a specific mode of existence with which to make an absolute evaluation of whether suicide is or is not preferable.

I thus suggest that our absurdity is not found in an interminable task of revolt. Rather, if we are Sisyphus, we are Sisyphus without the Gods, the boulder, or the mountain, but with the choice to die. Without a universally accepted understanding of the human condition, which is a

²⁵ 'Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence'. Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 31.

²⁶ Camus, p. 1

precariousness enforced by the fragmentation elicited by suicide, the individual retains a form of autonomy in the potential to die but without the order offered to Sisyphus by the Gods. The logic of the absurd relies on interpreting this repeating failure to find a universal meaning as an absolute truth, and thereby a consistent experience to revolt against. In other words, the repetition of failure orders meaning and enables perseverance to be considered inherently valuable. But this absurd ordering of meaning by confounding repetition with inviolability is ruptured by voluntary death. Because the persistence which underpins value in Camus's understanding of the absurd can be autonomously rejected, the process of engendering this value through repetition is insecure.

Suicide opposes the mechanism which drives the logic of McCullers's and Camus's texts: survival. Singer's death continues to trouble the events that follow it, as he eschews, while becoming a manifestation of, the unassailable separation between McCullers's characters. Neither living nor dying contends with this insurmountable challenge. This failure of both death and life leads to an inherent irresolution. The question of whether to live or die is ongoing and there is no sense of order or secured understanding, such as the value of revolt, to anchor an answer. Like Sisyphus, then, we repeat by continuing, but unlike Camus's reading of Sisyphus, this repetition is not necessitated and does not generate a sustained, absolute, and universal condition. As such, I propose that the strain of human living is caused by the inevitable insecurity engendered by the either always unsettled or conclusively self-destroying challenge of ascertaining when perseverance is not enough and the permanent rupture of suicide, and all the suffering it causes, seems warranted.

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