

## FILLING THE BLANK PAGE: A COMPARISON OF CARSON McCULLERS' *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* AND JERZY KOSINSKI'S *BEING THERE*

CONSTANTE GONZÁLEZ GROBA  
Universidad de Santiago de Compostela

Although the term *intertextuality* was coined in the 1960s,<sup>1</sup> the existence of the phenomenon is at least as old as that of texts. Many theorists believe that no text exists as a closed, self-sufficient system, that intertextuality is the very condition of literature, that each text is woven from the threads of other texts, whether the authors are conscious of it or not.<sup>2</sup> There are two basic reasons for this belief: 1) every writer is a reader of other texts before he or she becomes a creator, so that every text is necessarily permeated

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1. The term was first used by Kristeva in her essay «Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman.» in *Critique* 239 (1967), pp. 438-65, trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon S. Roudiez as «Word, dialogue and novel», in Toril Moi, ed. *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Taking Kristeva's concept of intertextuality as limited to the actual presence in a text of fragments of another text, Genette proposed the more adequate term *transtextuality* (textual transcendence), a term which includes everything, either explicit or latent, which connects one text to others (Still and Worton 22).

2. Before the days of structuralism, when the term *intertextuality* did not even exist, theorists expressed their belief that individual literary works are inseparable from the literary current that precedes it. In 1913 John Macy wrote: «Literature is a succession of books from books. Artistic expression springs from life ultimately but not immediately. It may be likened to a river which is swollen throughout its course by new tributaries and by the seepages of its banks; it reflects the life through which it flows, taking colour from the shores; the shores modify it, but its power and volume descend from distant headwaters and affluents far up stream...

The literary mind is strengthened and nurtured, is influenced and mastered, by the accumulated riches of literature» (3-4,5).

with all kinds of allusions, covert or overt quotations, influences and echoes. As Barthes proved, a text may appear to be the spontaneous and transparent expression of a writer's intentions, but must necessarily contain elements of other texts; 2) a text is actualized through the process of reading, and that actualization depends to a large degree on the enrichment of the textual material under scrutiny with all the readings of other texts which the reader, consciously or unconsciously, inevitably brings to it (Still and Worton 1-2, 19). As Robert Scholes says, «reading consists of bringing texts together. It is a constructive activity, a kind of writing.» (6) And the reader's acquaintance with some text, or some critical or interpretive theory, even if they are unknown to the author, may result in a fresh reading, as both the discourse of the author and that of the reader are inherently dialogical and intertextual. Each reader inevitably finds in or imposes on a new text pieces or segments from other texts, even if they were written in a later period. Barthes and Borges emphasized the circularity of memory in reading, which allows the reader to see a text through the lense of all and any familiar texts, to place each new text in relation to old ones, and the best way to read a text is by bringing it together with the traces of other texts in our memories (Scholes 21, 22). When we read we not only construct a text through its relations with other texts, we also «construct» ourselves in the sense that we shape the text of our consciousness and we write ourselves as we link our readings. Reading is thus a constructive activity that works as a current that moves in two opposite directions: when we read we not only rewrite the text of the work within the text of our lives (Barthes), we «bring the text home, into our thoughts and lives, into our judgements and deeds» (Scholes 6), but we also read –and write– the book of our selves into the text in front of us.

This paper was suggested by the many similarities I found in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There* (1971). Although I have no incontrovertible evidence of a direct influence of McCullers on Kosinski, it is likely that he was somehow acquainted with McCullers' most famous novel. He came to American literature from another language and culture –he fled Poland and entered the United States in 1957, at the age of 24– at a time when McCullers was one of America's most popular writers. He might at least have seen Robert Ellis Miller's 1968 film version of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. In any case the parallels I posit between *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Being There* rest on an intertextual basis, a basis of resemblance or coincidence, and not necessarily of direct influence, as, for whatever reason and from whatever source, Kosinski actually follows a path previously travelled by Carson McCullers. This striking resemblance points up the continuity in the literary depiction of human types, problems and themes. The methods of approach can widely differ, but no single author has the monopoly of thought or is entitled to an exclusive articulation of any single theme. And the procedure of comparison, and sometimes of contrast, that I follow can be claimed as a perfectly viable alternative in critical analysis. As Scholes says, «comparison and contrast is not just some sort of academic reflex but a fundamental part of the reading process –which is to say, the thinking process.» (80)

The complexities of literary study spring not only from the uniqueness and intricacy of individual works but also from the fruitful and often puzzling interplay among them.

In my view, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Being There* can be considered to be variations on the same theme: the tendency of the individual confined in the empty prison of his own subjectivity to constitute himself by projecting on and identifying with other individuals, to construct reality in relation to his hidden wishes and fears. The two central characters, John Singer and Chance respectively, share not only psychological features but narrative and symbolic functions as well. They are made into idols and leaders by the other characters who become their admiring satellites.

In spite of their thematic and structural similarities, the two novels differ significantly in mood and technique. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* the narration is subjective and the narrator is throughout highly sympathetic to the characters, whereas the narrator of *Being There* is always detached and distanced and never prone to introspection or sympathy. The characters of McCullers' novel are full of emotions and noble ideals and keep the capacity to dream and to search for love. Those in Kosinski's satiric novella, in contrast, lack interior emotional life and are more replete with cocktails and television consumption than with ideals or illusions. In *Being There* we detect the author's evident intention of satirizing the shallowness and emptiness of contemporary American society, but beneath the satiric purpose there is a more general meaning for the reader to abstract.

McCullers' novel is set in a provincial small town in the Deep South in the late 1930s, when the menace of a second World War is increasingly voiced over the radio. The action of *Being There* takes place in cosmopolitan New York in the late 1960s during the Vietnam War. The cold war is at its peak and some of those who were soldiers or officers in the World War are now «soldiers of peace» at the United Nations. In both novels we perceive the anguish of the contemporary individual, cut off from God by disbelief and from other individuals by his narcissistic tendencies. God has been displaced by science, traditional morality by materialism, stable beliefs and guiding principles by relativism, even nihilism. The mood is one of spiritual barrenness, insecurity and instability, both in the private and the public sphere. The individual continues to be the teleological animal who gravitates toward myths and ideals, but the myths and ideals of the twentieth-century individual cannot be detached from his subjectivity, and his idols are empty and function as mirrors which reflect back a narcissistically projected image of the subject.

In both *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *Being There* the central character has a double dimension: a «real» one –the real Singer and Chance as they are known only to the reader– and one of illusion and dream– the fantastic transformation to which their admirers subject them. The idealization of Singer and Chance takes different modalities, depending on the idea each of their admirers conceives of them. Both of them occupy a central position in the respective novels only insofar as they constitute the hub in which the dreams of the others converge, and their roles depend on what they mean to their

satellites, rather than on their essence or identity. The reader perceives both Singer and Chance as static characters who remain unaffected by the others, in spite of the influence they unwittingly exert on them.

One of the characteristics shared by Singer and Chance is their unknown mysterious origin. Singer came to the small Southern town a few years ago, and nobody knows anything about his origin, his previous life or his ethnic background. Chance's mother died when he was born, and nobody would tell him who his father was, and he has no family. The lawyers in charge of the state of the deceased man he has been working for have no record of him at all, and he can produce no personal identification, no official document with name and address, or age. Members of the staff of the Soviet embassy produce a computer analysis of Chance which proves it «impossible to determine in any way whatsoever his ethnic background or to ascribe his accent to any single community in the entire United States!».» (95) It is precisely Singer's and Chance's aura of mystery and indeterminacy that constitutes the basis of their principal effect on the structure of the respective novels as a whole. Immersed in his thoughts about his absent friend Antonapoulos, the solitary John Singer appears to have an intense inner life which, together with his deaf-muteness, gives him an air of wisdom which makes him attractive to the alienated characters who people McCullers' novel. This is what the observant Biff Brannon notices in the second chapter of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*:

The fellow was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human (25-26).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Singer and Chance are unknown to their admirers and cannot reciprocate them –the former is a deaf-mute and the latter is mentally retarded– makes them *unobjectionable*, which is precisely why one of the plutocrats in Washington D. C. proposes Chance as the next candidate for vice-president: «Gardiner has no background! And so he's not and cannot be objectionable to anyone!».» (104)<sup>4</sup>

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3. The passage contains an echo of I Corinthians, 2: 9: «But as it is written, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, neither has the human heart thought of what God has prepared for those who love Him”».

4. Robert Ziegler makes an accurate assessment of Chance as the ideal politician: «What makes Chance so eligible, so desirable as a politician, is the insubstantial, gratuitous quality that his name itself suggests. Like a party platform that is drafted to say both everything and nothing, and whose purpose is to avoid specifics and thus not alienate constituents, Chance emerges as the ideal candidate, who is whatever one desires, the empty page on which an electorate can inscribe its diverse messages» (2).

Singer and Chance function as blank empty pages which their admirers fill according to their respective psychological makeups and deepest aspirations, as blank surfaces on which they project and write themselves, rather than regarding the true persons in them. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* Mick Kelly can only imagine God as «Mr Singer with a long *white sheet* around him» (108, emphasis mine), and in *Being There* the Russian spies actually codename Chance «blank page» (95).<sup>5</sup> Singer and Chance are simultaneously close—their admirers have easy access to them—and distant—they cannot communicate: Singer is isolated by his deaf-muteness and his exclusive devotion to his friend Antonapoulos, and Chance by his radical innocence and mental retardation. Since they cannot possibly make themselves known, Singer and Chance remain inconcrete and indeterminate, and manifest a persistent resistance to definition. Thus EE, the major admirer of Chance, «noticed the meticulous care he took to insure that nothing he said to her or to anyone else was definite enough to reveal what he thought of her or of anyone or, indeed, of anything.» (59)

The admirers who write the blank pages of Chance and Singer all search for, and dream of, some kind of security, some vital (non-existent) center for their lives. Singer and Chance are constantly changed and reshaped by the vehicles which manifest them, be they their admirers or the words the latter use to represent the former. As is the case with all the artistic representations of the whale Ishmael searches and studies in *Moby-Dick*, all the constructions and phantasies about Singer and Chance hit somewhere off the unreachable mark. To put it in Lacanian terms, Singer and Chance could very well be representations of the ungraspable phenomenon, the pursuits and verbal constructions of their admirers, the enactment of language and desire reaching after a hidden, alienated, yet somehow familiar reality. The construction of Singer and Chance as idols rests on the basis of difference—they are the opposite of what each admirer is, and contain the promise of what each one of them lacks—; they are made into the presence that is going to fill all the gaps, to substitute plenitude for the permanent lack that originates and constitutes the desiring subject. And it seems that Singer and Chance are more the product than the source of the desires of their admirers.

It is the indefiniteness of Singer and Chance that opens the way to so many interpretations and variations as those of the music with which Mick Kelly associates Singer. Singer and Chance are nothing, but they are everything: their identity (rather, their non-identity) is multiple and so versatile that it promises the satisfaction of the most varied illusions and needs of so many admirers. This is the psychological mechanism of projection whereby the subject perceives external reality and responds to it according to his interests, habits, emotional states, expectations, etc.<sup>6</sup> In this respect,

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5. In an interview, Kosinski said that one of his working titles for *Being There* was precisely *Blank Page* (Plimpton and Landesman 200).

6. This is a traditional pre-Freudian use of projection which has survived. Projection in Freud is not a simple identification of the other person with oneself and it always involves the

Singer and Chance function like a Rorschach or a T.A.T. projective test, in which the subject is confronted by relative unstructured situations and ambiguous stimuli. The subject tested interprets the stimuli in accordance with his personality structure, and he projects what he *is* as well as what he *refuses to be*, which allows the specialist to read traits of the analyzand's character, as well as patterns of organization of his emotions and behavior (Laplanche and Pontalis 350, 354). Benjamin Rand sees Chance as another businessman concerned about high taxes, political exploitation, and misunderstanding by the general public. Concerned about his approaching death, Rand sees in Chance the self-acceptance and equanimity that he lacks. For Rand's wife EE, starved of love and sex, Chance is so understanding, loving and sexy that she cannot keep her mind nor her hands off him. For the President, in serious trouble because of the state of the economy, Chance is the one who offers sound economic advice. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* Mick Kelly sees Singer as the only one who can understand her inner turmoil. This troubled adolescent relates Singer with the snow she dreams about in the torrid Georgia summer and with the music which haunts her mind. Benedict Copeland, the black doctor obsessed with racial oppression, believes Singer to be a Jew, which expresses his longing for identification with members of oppressed races. To Copeland Singer is the ideal white man and his face resembles that of Spinoza, the Jewish philosopher whose work Copeland reads avidly. For Jake Blount Singer is Irish, and the only one who listens to and sympathizes with the muddled Marxism that Blount preaches. The characters who gravitate around Singer and Chance see in them the possibility of fulfilling and thus being liberated from their desires. Singer and Chance appear to be free from the internal divisions and the imperfection expressed by desire. It is as if they existed in a state of timeless being and enjoyed a peace –the mindless peace that fills Chance's chest at the end of *Being There* –which is unattainable in the process of becoming that constitutes the subject and makes him an other to himself. Singer and Chance are the love objects of their narcissistic admirers, who in this case make the objects of their admiration represent some aspects of their projective ideal selves which neither the deaf-mute nor the ex-gardener have.<sup>7</sup> They are empty and silent, and at the same time pregnant with infinite meanings and suggestions. Being creations of others, and each the absence of a presence, makes Singer and Chance so powerful as images (Rothschild 62). In this respect, they appear to be reincarnations of Moby Dick, the white whale on whose shiny blank surface each member of the Pequod's crew projects his own meaning. The admirers of Singer and Chance do basically the same thing as the pursuers of the

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throwing out of what one refuses either to recognize in oneself or to be oneself (Laplanche and Pontalis 352, 354).

7. McCullers explains the situation in her outline for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: «Each one of these four people creates his understanding of the mute from his own desires... Each one of these persons makes the mute the repository for his most personal feelings and ideas» («Author's Outline» 137).

elusive monster imagined by Melville when each one of them interprets the golden doubloon, itself emblematic of the mythic white whale, in his own image, always depending on the psychology and the socio-cultural environment of each observer. The solipsism professed by Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*— «...and this round gold [the doubloon] is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self» (541)—characterizes the individuals who gravitate around Singer and Chance, whose plasticity makes them liable to infinite transformations. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* this attitude is shared by practically all the population of the town, which produces the most varied readings of the polyvalent text constituted by John Singer:

So the rumours about the mute were rich and varied. The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he had received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C. I. O. A lone Turk who had roamed into the town years ago... claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish. He said that when he spoke his language the mute understood. (177)

There is a similar episode in *Being There* when, during a reception, the Soviet ambassador speaks to Chance in Russian and is convinced that he understands (70). Since both Singer and Chance are incapable of showing their disagreement because of their respective handicaps, the people who relate with them systematically assume that they agree with them.<sup>8</sup> Most of the scarce occasions in which Chance speaks he does it about the only reality he knows: the seasonal changes, the productivity, the growth and the tending of gardens. But his listeners fill his literal words with metaphorical meaning, in a similar manner as they fill his person with non-existent qualities.

If readers—admirers are constituted differently, different readers—admirers project different traits on the same text. But Singer and Chance are each more than a mysterious text or an enigma to be deciphered from different perspectives. They are converted into unwitting gods. Wrongly assuming that Chance is intentionally trying to act and sound above the heads of the «videots», the chairman of the board of the BBC introduces the famous quotation from *Coriolanus*: «It's what they want, after all: 'a god to punish, not a man of their infirmity'» (73). In her outline of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* Carson McCullers pointed to the following secondary themes:

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8. The same mechanism is at work in the penultimate episode of Kosinski's *Steps* (1968), where the narrator had travelled to another country to satisfy his curiosity about the experience of revolution: «As I did not understand their language, I played a deaf-mute, and I played my part well. Each group I joined claimed me as its own, handing me weapons and insignia as if convinced that it was the most natural thing in the world for a spastic to fight for the future they envisioned for their country» (143).

(1) There is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by a man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator. (2) In a disorganized society these individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. (136)

Deprived of the stable patterns of meaning supplied in previous epochs and in traditional cultures by the myths and the beliefs accepted by all, the uprooted characters, typical of our times, who people the two novels under analysis have to create their own myths and idols from their own subjectivity. Significantly, none of the four admirers of Singer is a dedicated practitioner of any religious denomination, and as early as in chapter two Biff Brannon, who wonders why Blount should choose a deaf-mute to unburden himself, suggests a possible connection between Singer and Christ:

Why?

Because in some men it is in them to give up everything personal at some time, before it ferments and poisons –throw it to some human being or some human idea. They have to. In some men it is in them –The text is «All men seek for Thee.» (32)<sup>9</sup>

Mick Kelly is the one who comes closest to recognizing the deification of Singer: «Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long white sheet around him. God was silent –maybe that was why she was reminded» (108). John Singer is not only a silent god, but a false one as well: he fails his followers when they need him most, as when Mick asks him for advice about taking a job which is going to take her out of school; he «listens» to them only to mitigate his own loneliness, and never tells them anything when he leaves the town to visit Antonapoulos in the asylum. Neither Singer nor Chance has the capacity to understand what he is told nor is either of them interested in the least, and each is equally powerless to satisfy the demands placed on him. In this sense, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *Being There* are similar to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, where the action centers around the efforts of several solitary and grotesque individuals to establish an intimate relationship with George Willard. Anderson's characters are also in search of channels for self-expression, in need of a relationship that allows them to recover a lost collective harmony. They are

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9. Biff is here remembering a text his wife Alice has just read aloud. It is the New Testament story of Simon and Andrew, who opt to follow Christ: «...and in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. And Simon and they that were with Him followed after Him. And when they had found Him, they said unto Him, "All men seek for Thee"» (*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* 31).



so alienated that, rather than turn to one another, they search for Willard, who cannot understand them and is not going to be with them very long. Besides, his absorption in his own dreams and problems incapacitates him for bearing such a heavy burden.

This process of idolization of Singer and Chance confirms the deeply rooted necessity of the individual to create a god who makes life meaningful by allowing transcendence. It does not matter too much if that god is false, if he is the absolute silence which does not understand or communicate anything, if he is more of an absence than a presence. It is precisely their silence and remoteness that make Singer and Chance prone to idolization: their lack of concretion and definition makes them godlike. The attitudes of the admirers of Singer and Chance reflect the contemporary philosophical conception that the systems of value and meaning do not exist objectively but only insofar as the individual perceives them or, rather, projects them on to the external world, no matter how strong the perception of that meaning and value as exterior and objective.

The election of a deaf-mute and a moron as ideal confidants and objects of desire is both the product and the manifestation of the admirers' internal conflicts. They seem to prefer the imaginary and the chimerical – their constructions of Singer and Chance – to the unsatisfactory actualities of their lives. Thus in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* Mick Kelly makes the impersonal Singer into an ideal father and refuses to let her real father, always sympathetic and hungry for communication, into her «inside room.»<sup>10</sup> Their failure to understand and communicate makes Singer and Chance forever mysterious and ungraspable, and thus preferable to concrete objects or ideals which, like the cigarettes Mick smokes, fade away relatively soon and leave the subject frustrated and dissatisfied. There is a resistance to confront the ideal with the real, the «inside room» with the «outside room.»

Communication with Singer and Chance is «perfect» and ideal; it never fails simply because it does not exist, because their admirers are happy with the mere illusion of communication. The fact that Singer is a deaf-mute and Chance a moron allows their satellites to satisfy contradictory impulses. Singer and Chance never contradict or offend their admirers; they never resist or oppose what the latter say, think or do. The ideal of the admirers is in both cases a form of monologism, in the sense that in their interaction with Singer and Chance they want to impose a discourse which does not suffer interference from the alien intentions of a real interlocutor. The writers of the blank

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10. Because she has no room of her own, Mick Kelly builds an imaginary one and divides her existence into two rooms: «With her it was like there was two places –the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mr Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony... The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself» (145-46).

pages Singer and Chance are authors who deny the individual subjectivity of their characters by imposing themselves on it, a practice which is the equivalent of totalitarianism in the political sphere (Holquist 34).<sup>11</sup> The admirers of Singer and, to a lesser degree, the people captivated by Chance, conform to Dembo's description of the monologist who makes the «thou» into an object:

A monologist, as we all know, is somebody who talks too much and never listens. Babblers, orator, or narrator out of touch with his audience, he is anyone for whom speech is not a means of mutual understanding or communication but the opportunity to perform, to use the language for its own sake or to create an impression –in short, for any purpose that does not involve dialogue. People who speak from an obsession are monologists; so are those speaking at cross-purposes. (3)

Singer and Chance provide their readers with inner freedom, with the opportunity to perform an act of self-creation through the uncharted human and psychic territory of these blank pages. These writers of blank pages do something similar to what, according to Clara Mucci, interpreters of texts frequently do. They perform «an act of appropriation and expropriation of a text, of a textual body that should be simply left open to speak with its own voice.» Interpretation is often an act of intrusion and even abuse on the text, as the interpreter is eager to erase the otherness in the text. And the blank page is the one which tells the most mysterious story, the place of all possible meanings (Mucci 23, 28). With such objects of admiration and desire as Singer and Chance, the individuality of the subject remains protected and safe, with no obstacles to develop and expand. The admirers can exert complete control without any danger of leaving the self compromised. Rather than being enraged by Chance's voyeuristic impotence, EE is happy to be liberated from the burden of accountability to him as partner: «You make me free. I reveal myself to myself and I am drenched and purged.» (87) Both Singer and Chance play into the hands of that tendency of the individual to resist union and communication in order to protect his subjective reality; at the same time, the illusory relationship with Singer and Chance allows their admirers to satisfy the forceful impulse toward transcendence and communication.

If talking to Singer and Chance is, in point of fact, no different from talking to oneself, McCullers and Kosinski, either consciously or unconsciously, seem to be saying that when loving or communicating, the individual is really getting in contact, not with the permanently elusive other, but with himself through the former. Being radically separate from others, the individual is incapable of seeing the

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<sup>11</sup>. The control is so powerful that in *Being There* EE changes Chance's name to Chauncey Gardiner (30)

other except as a mirror reflection of himself, as this passage from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* seems to suggest:

The eyes of his friend [Antonapoulos] were moist and dark and in them he [Singer] saw the little rectangled pictures of himself that he had watched a thousand times (194).

In Kosinski the self also needs projection for its configuration. As the protagonist's mistress says in *Steps*:

*Then, all you need me for is to provide a stage on which you can project and view yourself, and see how your discarded experiences become alive again when they affect me. Am I right? You don't want me to love you; all you want is for me to abandon myself to the dreams and fantasies which you inspire in me...*  
(131)

In the same novel, the protagonist near the end makes possible a successful affair when he pretends to be a deaf-mute so that another woman can relate to him. By separating himself from the verbal aspect of language the protagonist extricates himself from the obligations of social interaction and the demands of communication.

The characters in McCullers and Kosinski conform to Christopher Lasch's description of the contemporary individual who is inescapably, even unconsciously, narcissistic, incapable of seeing the world other than «as a mirror of himself and has no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image.» (Lasch 96) References to mirrors are abundant in *Being There*, always in relation to Chance who likes himself in mirrors. When he watches television, «the figure of the TV screen looked like his own reflection in a mirror.» (11) Television, which is present throughout *Being There*—McCullers' novel belongs to the days of the radio—, constitutes an adequate symbol for the narcissism of a stupefied society.<sup>12</sup> During his appearance at the *This Evening* show, Chance «was astonished that television could portray itself; cameras watched themselves and, as they watched, they televised a program... Of all the manifold things there were in all the world—trees, grass, flowers, telephones, radios, elevators—only TV constantly held up a mirror to its own neither solid nor fluid

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12. According to Christopher Lasch, one of the social influences that are bringing a narcissistic type of personality organization into increasingly greater prominence is “the proliferation of visual and audial images in the ‘society of the spectacle.’ We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors” (96-97).

face.» (52) It is precisely their inescapable narcissism that distinguishes men from plants, since «there is no mirror in which the plant can recognize its face.» (9)

There is a further important structural point shared by the two novels: each of the idols is, in turn, dependent on another idol (neither is the center of the structure he apparently governs), and this is unknown to their admirers. Singer's object of devotion is the deaf-mute Antonapoulos, totally opposed to the former: Singer is slim, active, disciplined and ascetic, whereas Antonapoulos is obese, lazy, sloppy and fond of food and masturbation. With his all-devouring orality, Antonapoulos makes the ideal object for a relationship in which Singer always gives everything. With the mental, sexual and spiritual development of a seven-year-old («Outline» 149), Antonapoulos is totally indifferent to everything Singer wants to share with him. The truth is that, deep down, Singer does not seem to care and the fact that Antonapoulos cannot reciprocate plays to his advantage –he can persuade himself that Antonapoulos understands him. His lack of knowledge of Antonapoulos' interior allows Singer to deceive himself, to attribute to his idol all the qualities that he wishes. Thus in the chess games he plays with his feeble-minded friend, it is Singer who moves both the white and the black pieces. It is a relationship in which the loved one is nothing but an external stimulus for a love which exists only inside the lover. Singer's attraction to such a repulsive person would seem to be detrimental to the very credibility of the novel, but McCullers is trying to make one of her fundamental points: that the qualities of the beloved are a mere creation of the subjectivity of the lover. This conception of love relationships, dramatized in one way or another in all of McCullers' novels, is explicitly voiced through the narrator of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

Now, the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love... Yes, and the lover may see this as clearly as anyone else –but that does not affect the evolution of his love one whit. A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp... Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. (33-34)

Things take an even more extreme turn in *Being There*, where Chance's object of admiration is the television, which he consumes as avidly as uncritically, because it fits his proverbial passivity. If Chance makes no demands on others, television makes no demands on him either. This major symbol of the emptiness and fragmentation of our postmodern age both relieves his isolation and cuts him off from a world he is incapable of relating to. This removal makes Chance himself a television screen for other people's projections (Klinkowitz 96). Chance derives all his reality from the images he sees on TV and he deals successfully with different kinds of people by simply imitating what he has seen on the tube. From television he learns to relate to people, and he wins the affection of EE by «repeating to her part of her own sentences, a practice he had

observed on TV.» (34) By being a nobody, Chance succeeds as the object of the affections of others. With the TV on, a mentally sterile Chance becomes «alive», he can see himself and react to that false identity reflected back to him from the screen. With the TV off, there is only emptiness, lifelessness:

He turned on the TV, sat down on the bed, and flicked the channel changer several times. Country houses, skyscrapers, newly built apartment houses, churches shot across the screen. He turned the set off. The image died; only a small blue dot hung in the center of the screen, as if forgotten by the rest of the world to which it belonged; then it too disappeared. The screen filled with grayness; it might have been a slab of stone (27-28).

In a similar manner, when the death of Antonapoulos deprives Singer of the mirror in which he has been seeing himself, he is left so empty and purposeless that he can only find peace in the non-being of death which will identify him with Antonapoulos. Television is the perfect medium, at once private and impersonal, for a permanently alone Chance, incapable of relating to anyone or even to himself. In the same way as Chance fears no interference or threat to his self-image, Singer runs no risk of being misunderstood or contradicted by his moronic Greek idol.

If Singer and Chance are blank pages filled with meaning by the characters who read / write them, their meaning equally changes according to the nature of the threads of the text of the self that reads the text in which they appear.<sup>13</sup> In the same way as the characters in McCullers' and Kosinski's respective artistic projections recreate themselves through their projection on their objects of desire, the result of the critic's interaction with the work of fiction may be a form of «autobiography.» Criticism is a self-reflexive activity, as the page shimmers and becomes a mirror of the critic, of his disposition, of his hidden fears and desires, of his readings of other texts, even of his favorite critical trends. Both McCullers and Kosinski conceived of fiction very much as an imaginative act of projection on the part of the author. In the introduction to her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958) Carson McCullers recognizes «many of the compulsions that made me write the play» and says that «a writer writes out of some inward compulsion to transform his own experience (much of it is unconscious) into the universal and symbolical. The themes the artist chooses are always deeply personal.» (viii) Kosinski also perceived fiction as the art of imaginative projection. For the Polish-born novelist the best fiction is autobiographical and experiential not only of the author but of the reader as well. In an interview Kosinski stated his belief that the work of fiction «acquires meaning only in the process of being decoded by another psyche.»

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13. For the self as text, see Scholes 2 ff.

that «any act of reading –indeed the act of reading anything –is an act of activating the projecting ability of the self.» (Teicholz 71, 85)<sup>14</sup> Like every reader of fiction, the readers of Kosinski and McCullers confront a situation not very different from that of the characters who project themselves on Singer and Chance. Apart from the raw fact that every text ends with a blank page, we can metaphorically assert that every text is at least in part a blank page, and we do not know for sure how much we get from it and how much we give, or write on it. The task of reading is an attempt to reconstitute the fragments of a text «into a whole that says at least as much about the reader as it says about the fiction itself.» (Bruss 168) And Kosinski said that he trusted the reader and thought him «perfectly capable of filling in the blank spaces, of supplying what I purposefully withdrew.» (Plimpton and Landesman 206) In the final analysis, it is impossible to say or determine exactly who and what Singer and Chance are, or what they mean, and the version of the reader or the critic is at least in part another fiction, just one more attempt to inscribe meaning in the permanently elusive blank page of the world –and of our lives.

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14. The interview, by Daniel J. Cahill, was originally published in *The North American Review* (Spring 1973): 55-66. In another interview, given to Klinkowitz, Kosinski said that «[f]iction assaults the reader directly as if saying: It is about you. You are actually creating this situation when you are reading about it; in a way you are staging it as an event of your own life» (Klinkowitz 100; Bellamy 149). The interview was originally published in *Fiction International* (1973): 31-48.

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