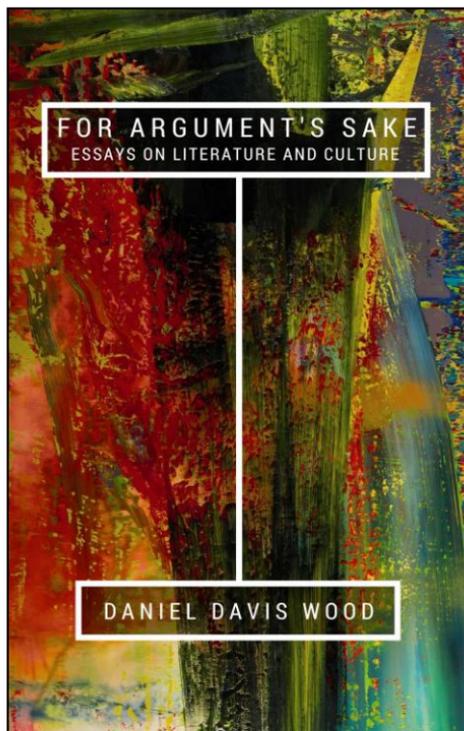


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 245-249.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



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HOWLING INTO THE SILENCE, YEARNING FOR A REPLY

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (22 December 2010).

IN 1972, DALE EDMONDS OF TULANE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHED what is, to the best of my knowledge, the first and still the longest of only a handful of scholarly studies of Carson McCullers' 'Correspondence.' Entitled "Correspondence': A 'Forgotten' Carson McCullers Short Story," Edmonds' study runs to a scant 2,200 words at the end of which he makes this declaration:

I would be reluctant to say as much as I have about 'Correspondence,' since the story succeeds so well on the immediate level, except for the fact that it has been virtually forgotten. 'Correspondence' is no stunning achievement, but it is a unified and effective minor work of short fiction. It deserves to be redeemed from the obscurity of the pages of an early wartime *New Yorker* to amuse — perhaps delight — readers who are still capable of being touched by the universal plight of adolescence. (92)

There are three things to say in response to these comments.

First: if Edmonds decided to write about this 'forgotten' story in order to somehow revivify it, his efforts unfortunately amounted to little. 'Correspondence' is today relegated to the back pages of McCullers' *Collected Stories* and occupies a position in the McCullers *oeuvre* nowhere near as prominent as any of the stories collected in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*.

Second: 'Correspondence' *is* an achievement. It is easily the sharpest and yet the most opaque short story McCullers ever wrote, and it has lingered with me ever since I began digging around in McCullers' minor work during the first half of 2010. I can no longer remember anything else I found, but I remember this story in crystalline detail.

Third: despite my admiration for 'Correspondence,' I was neither amused nor delighted by it. Maybe that's my fault; maybe I'm just no longer "capable of being touched by the universal plight of adolescence" (Edmonds 92). Or maybe the qualities of the story

that make it interesting are not intended to generate amusement and delight in its readers, although Dale Edmonds did not recognise those qualities because he did not allow himself to read 'Correspondence' as anything other than a light-hearted sketch of adolescent angst and awkwardness.

'Correspondence' consists of four brief letters written by a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl named Henrietta 'Henky' Evans and posted to her penpal, a Brazilian boy named Manoel García. "Dear Manoel," she begins: "I guess seeing the American address on this letter you already know what it is. Your name was on the list tacked on the blackboard at High School of South American students we could correspond with. I was the one who picked your name" (119). Henky tells Manoel all about herself and even goes so far as to conjure fantasies involving Manoel before he has had a chance to write a reply: "I thought a long time about you, Manoel, before writing this letter. And I have this strong feeling that we would get along together. ... I feel like I have known you for a very long time and that we could discuss all sorts of things together" (120). Finally, Henky concludes with an invitation: "Would you like to come and spend your summer vacation with me next summer? I think that would be marvelous. Also other plans have been in my mind. Maybe next year after we have a visit together you could stay in my home and go to High School here and I could swap with you and stay in your home and go to South American High School..." (121).

Manoel, however, never responds, leaving Henky discouraged but not so despondent as to cease writing. Instead, Henky takes Manoel's silence as a *de facto* reply and proceeds to write him a second letter in which she considers the implications of his silence and reveals more of herself in order to draw from him a more articulate response. "Three weeks have gone by and I would have thought that by now there would be a letter from you," she begins. "I had not thought I would write to you again until I heard from you... [but] it must take a long time these days for things to reach foreign countries" (121). Then, after a one-page elaboration on the fantasies contained in her earlier letter, she signs off: "Every afternoon I wait for the postman. I have a strong feeling or a kind of hunch that I

will hear from you on this afternoon's mail or tomorrow. Communications must take longer than I had figured on even by air mail" (122). But again Manoel does not respond, and his obstinate silence stirs up a simmering rage within Henky that flourishes in proportion to her rapidly diminishing enthusiasm and good cheer.

Noting this in his article on 'Correspondence,' Dale Edmonds wonders what Manoel García would make of it all. "One can imagine [his] consternation," writes Edmonds, "as he reads that the unknown American girl is unpopular with her classmates, that she has a bad case of hives, that she believes in reincarnation — and all the rest" (92). But, in so saying, Edmonds seems to me to disturb the story's artistic integrity. 'Correspondence' offers no hint that Manoel García even receives Henky's letters, nor, indeed, any hint that he even exists. It is a feature of the story that Manoel García is entirely absent, since the story takes the form of Henky's letters to Manoel and since those letters are generated by her failure to accept his absence *qua* absence.

When Edmonds joins Henky in speculating on the character of Manoel García, he transforms the aesthetic feature of Manoel's absence into a fault in need of correction or, at least, amelioration. Henky's refusal to accept Manoel's absence and her inability to tolerate his silence together furnish the story with its dramatic foundations, and the drama (such as it is) emerges when Henky's inability to tolerate Manoel's silence leads her to write to him again and, in doing so, to take his silence as a sign of his presence, to interpret it as an aspect of his character, and thus to effectively assemble Manoel from within herself and to place him in greater opposition to herself as one letter gives way to the next. From start to finish, 'Correspondence' is Henky's interiority brought onto the page by virtue of her irrepressible urge to understand an absence in the world on its own terms. To approach the story as such is to watch it betray its own title: far from engaging with a 'co-respondent' at all, Henky Evans is herself the sole but repeated respondent to a silence she cannot fathom. Approach the story in search of Manoel García, though, and very quickly its title extends beyond the page and into the real world: the correspondence in question applies less and less to Henky's letters

as the drama unfolds, and more and more to the emergent kinship between the girl and the reader who shares her purpose.

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