II
SOMEONE TO TALK TO: THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

The title McCullers gave her first novel was The Mute, but the editor changed it to The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.¹ Its principal theme seems to be an individual's compulsion to revolt against enforced isolation and the individual's urge to express the self at all cost. In other words, the theme is that sense of moral isolation, expressed in terms of loneliness and longing, which is both the social evil of the modern world and the inescapable condition of man.

The novel had been gestating for many months. McCullers was troubled by it constantly, but she could not leave it alone. First, she conceived the protagonist as John Minovich; then, he became Harry Minowitz, a Jew. She had been writing

¹ Probably after a poem, "The Lonely Hunter," by William Sharp ("Fiona MacLeod") in which occurs the line, "My heart is a lonely hunter that hunts on a lonely hill." "Fiona MacLeod" (William Sharp), Poems and Dramas (New York: Duffield & Company, 1914), p.27.
at random, with the characters simply appearing and forcing themselves upon her pages. Although she wrote everyday, the whole thing made no sense. Then one day, a great light seemed to flash in her mind. Excitedly she announced to her mother that at last she knew that the protagonist was a deaf-mute named John Singer. McCullers describes these sudden illuminations as "the grace of labor." She describes the process as follows:

The dimensions of a work of art are seldom realized by the author until the work is accomplished. It is like a flowering dream. Ideas grow, budding silently, and there are a thousand illuminations coming day by day as the work progresses. A seed grows in writing as in nature. The seed of the idea is developed by both labor and the unconscious, and the struggle that goes on between them.

I understand only particles. I understand the characters, but the novel itself is not in focus. The focus comes at random moments which no one can understand, least of all the author. For me, they usually follow great effort. To me, these illuminations are the grace of
labor. All of my work has happened this way. It is at once the hazard and the beauty that a writer has to depend on such illuminations. After months of confusion and labor, when the idea has flowered, the collusion is Divine. It always comes from the subconscious and cannot be controlled.

For a whole year I worked on The Heart is a Lonely Hunter without understanding it at all. Each character was talking to a central character, but why, I didn't know. I'd almost decided that the book was no novel, that I should chop it up into short stories. But I could feel the mutilation in my body when I had that idea, and I was in despair. I had been working for five hours and I went outside. Suddenly, as I walked across a road, it occurred to me that Harry Minowitz, the character all the other characters were talking to, was a different man, a deaf-mute, and immediately the name was changed to John Singer. The whole focus of the novel was fixed and I was for the first time committed with my whole soul to The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.²

---

The novel burst upon the literary scene amid reviewers' accolades that the young author was the most exciting new talent of the decade. That she could publish a best-selling novel at twenty-three was feat enough, but to write with a knowledge and insight that so obviously transcended her years and experience was just short of a miracle.

There are five major characters in the novel: Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Doctor Copeland, and John Singer. It is from the singular relation of the characters to one another that the novel takes its shape. According to Ihab H. Hassan, "What makes the relations singular, literally, is that they are all centripetal; all the characters are singly drawn towards one man, the deaf-mute, Singer, who stands bewilderedly at the center. The novel's structure is broken up to convey the sense of 'mutual isolation' ; each person remains in a padded cubicle, victimized by the very dreams which nourish his dignity."  As the "Author's outline of 'The Mute!'" suggests,

This is the theme of man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as is possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several counter themes and some of these may be stated briefly as follows:

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.

3. Each man must express himself in his own way — but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society.

4. Human beings are innately co-operative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature.

5. Some men are heroes by nature in that they will give all that is in them without regard to the effort or to the personal returns.

It is the infirmity of the protagonist, John Singer, that makes his outward character vague.

and unlimited. The loneliness that the other four major characters — Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, and Doctor Copeland — face makes them see in Singer a certain mystic superiority and consider him their ideal. They seem to find in him all the qualities they wish for him to have. His silence is compelling which makes them consider Singer the repository for the most personal feelings and ideals. McCullers did not, as many reviewers thought, make Singer a deaf-mute because she had a fondness for the unusual as such but because of his symbolic value. His Greek friend Antonapoulos' defect, which is mental as well as physical, is likewise essential to the moral of the story. The fact that Singer's four friends do not see him as he real is but as they imagine him, and that Singer does not see Antonapoulos as he really is but as he (Singer) imagines him, suggests that what men see in other men whom they admire or love is not what is really there but what they wish to find. McCullers seems to suggest through this novel that the more grotesque and repulsive a character is who is yet capable of inspiring love in another, the more forcefully does he illustrate this thesis.
His attentive silence and thoughtful eyes draw the four people close to him: Mick Kelly, a girl burdened by the care of two younger children, by poverty, and by frustration of her ambition to become a musician; Biff Brannon, who operates an all-night cafe; Jake Blount, an itinerant Marxist, who presently works for a carnival; and Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, a proud and bitter black physician whose intense commitment to Marxism as the only means of raising the status of blacks has alienated him from most of his friends and relatives.

There are two mutes in the novel, one a very fat Greek Antonopoulos, the other, Singer, very tall and immaculate. They have no friends and have lived together for ten years. For Singer, "Nothing seemed real except the ten years with Antonopoulos." He has the following dream about Antonopoulos:

Out of the blackness of sleep a dream formed. There well dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps.

Antonapoulos kneeled at these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He was naked and cold and he could not take his eyes from Antonapoulos and the thing he held above him. Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. His own hands were huge wind-mills and he stared fascinated at the unknown thing that Antonapoulos held. (185)

The mute Greek is sent to an asylum by his cousin when he (the mute) begins to behave obscenely in public. Singer becomes desolate.

Biff Brannon is the owner of the New York cafe where Singer takes his meals. Biff has a weakness for cripples and sick people. Jake Blount, a man with long powerful arms, visits the cafe and enjoys his drink at Biff's expense. Jake thinks that in spite of being a mute, Singer is the only person who can understand him and the message he is
trying to give. Dr. Copeland is the only Negro doctor in town. He is an idealistic man and works hard to rise the standards of Negroes. One dark night, Singer had helped him light a cigarette in the rain. It was the first time that a white man had offered him help or smiled at him.

Mick Kelly is another important character in the novel. She is the daughter of the owner of the boarding-house where Singer has a room. She has just entered her teens and is always dressed in shorts, a shirt and tennis shoes. She loves music and is prepared to go anywhere to hear it. To her music is the symbol of beauty and freedom. She has no musical background and has little chance of educating herself. There is no radio in her house. In the summer she walks on the streets of the town listening to any music she can hear from other people's houses. She starts reading at the public library and learns from books some of the things she needs to know. In the fall she enters the Vocational High School. She arranges to have primary lessons on the piano with a classmate of hers. At home no one realizes what she wants. It is Singer who lets
her talk to him when she feels lonely. She begins to centre her undirected love on Singer because he fulfils her desire to always have a person to love and admire.

It has been pointed out by some critics that Singer resembles Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky. There is an aura of holiness about the characters which is associated with their simplicity. Both the characters inspire confidences in the most unlikely persons. When we read that Singer has in his face "something gentle and Jewish, the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed" (114), "a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise" (9), we are reminded of the Dostoevskyian doctrin that it is suffering which ennobles and redeems mankind.

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is neither religious nor political but concerns the struggle of individuals to free themselves from the cells of their beings. Hungry for human sympathy, each of the four characters confides in Singer just as Singer has confided in Antonapoulos. However, each fails to
understand that the deaf-mute, although he reads lips, understands little of what he is told. Longing for sympathetic ear, the four characters, like their deaf-mute idol, create in their own image what one of them calls "a sort of home-made god" (198). From Singer's side, he considers Mick pitiful, Jack crazy, Doctor Copeland hopeful, and Biff thoughtful, but he always welcomes them when they come to meet him.

It can be said that the four characters seek Singer's company chiefly because of what they think he has to offer them, not because they wish to offer him anything their own. This point has been elaborated by Horace Taylor. He points out that the selfishness of each character is demonstrated in the scene when all of them meet by chance in Singer's room. It is an awkward occasion. While each of them was able to talk freely when he was alone with Singer, none of them is able to do so in the presence of the others:

They cannot say anything. Each of them regards the others as intruders and considers his own need of Singer as paramount. When they are finally able to talk it is about the most superficial subject of all,
the weather... What is revealed in the incident is the unconscious but utter selfishness of these people. Each of them is solely concerned with the pouring out of his own inner compulsions to Singer.  

Singer vaguely recognizes the complexity of the situation, but he cannot understand its psychological impact. He writes a letter to his friend:

You remember the four people I told you about when I was there .... They are all very busy people.... I do not mean that they work at their jobs all day and night but that they have much business in their minds always that does not let them rest. They come up to my room and talk to me until I do not understand how a person can open and shut his or her mouth so much without being weary. (However, the New York Café owner is different ... He watches. The other all have something they hate. And

---

they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company. That is why they are always so busy.)

That is the way they talk when they come to my room. Those words in their hearts do not let them rest so they are always very busy.... They all came to my room at the same time today. They sat like they were from different cities. They were even rude.... (183-184)

During his vacation, Singer goes to see his Greek friend. He takes beautiful presents with him. But the Greek shows interest only in food. It is here that Singer takes his hands out of his pocket. He becomes tired trying to tell his friend with his hands everything he had seen and thought since he was separated from his friend. Though Antonapoulos shows no interest, Singer tries his best to entertain him. But when he leaves, the Greek is still impatient.

When one of the sisters gets sick, the loss of her salary makes things worse for the Kellys. The family do not want Mick to work because they think that she is too young. The fact that they talk
about her welfare prompts Mick to apply for a job. She gets it but everynight when she returns after her work, she is too tired to do anything except sleep.

Mick has a friend, Harry Minowitz, whose function in the novel is to serve both as the agent of her sexual initiation and as a contrast to her. Mick and Harry have different prospects for the future. Although Harry must work to support his widowed mother, he can find a high-paying part-time job; thus he can finish studying mechanics at the local high school. Mick says, "A boy has a better advantage like that than a girl. I mean a boy can usually get some part-time job that don't take him out of school and leaves him time for other things. But there's not jobs like that for girls. When a girl wants a job she has to quit school and work full-time". (210) After Harry and Mick have sex, Harry leaves town, either because he feels guilty or because he wants to avoid being tied down. We are not informed of Harry's ultimate fate, but he can support himself as a skilled mechanic and has at least escaped the small town to which Mick feels bound. Mick's tiring full-time job at Woolworth's
puts an end to her dreams of a musical career. In fact, she is haunted early in the novel by a nightmare which opposes her fantasies of success and prefigures her destiny. She dreams she is swimming through enormous crowds of people, pushing and shoving them out of her way. Sometimes she is on the ground, trampled by the crowds until her insides ooze out on the pavement. Mick's sleeping mind, at least, knows that the world will not allow her to succeed in realizing her dreams of independence and art.

Singer goes to see his Greek friend again. He takes a number of gifts to his friend. When he reaches the asylum, he is told that the Greek is dead. This news gives Singer the greatest shock of his life. Controlling his grief, he finds his way back to town, leaves his luggage at the station, goes to his room, and kills himself by putting a bullet through his chest.

Singer's death leaves his four friends confused. They try to adjust to his death, though they are still isolated from one another and continue
to be lonely hunters for selfless love and spiritual understanding. The novelist describes the four characters as "spokes" in a wheel and Singer as the hub. Like the spokes in a wheel, the four do not come closer to one another through their association with Singer though each of them talks uninhibitedly to Singer. Singer's response is not always intuitively wise; he expresses bewilderment at the interest these people have in him. As a result, each character, except Mick, is as defeated and isolated at the end of the book as at the beginning.

Doctor Copeland and Jake Blount are doomed to isolation because of defects in their own character. Biff Brannon's situation is less desperate than that of the other main characters. He succeeds in achieving a sort of adjustment — the mechanical relationship which he, as a restaurant proprietor, enjoys with them alleviates to some extent his sense of loneliness. Even though he loses money in maintaining the restaurant, he continues it: "The business was losing money. There were many slack hours. Still at meal-time the place was full and he saw many hundreds of acquaintances as he stood guard behind the cash counter" (193).
Biff is conscious of Singer's charm, but he does not depend on him as the others do. As he has less need of Singer, he is the only one who does not fashion the deaf-mute according to his own wishes. He is the only character who can see Singer with a little objectivity. He wonders how much Singer really understands of what is said to him. He feels attracted to Mick, but as she grows older he loses interest in her and is able to play the role of a detached observer.

It has been pointed out that there are no fewer than six cases of frustration in the novel. Five of them involve the love of one individual for another which is either unreturned (Singer-Antonapoulos), unrecognized (Harry-Jake, Mick-Singer), spurned (Lucile-Leroy), or mistaken for its opposite (Biff-Mick). Three of them involve the love of an individual for an ideal: Copeland longs for racial equality, Jake for social justice, and Mick for her music.

The structure of the book is strictly symmetrical with Singer at its centre and the other main characters grouped in satellite fashion. Singer's
suicide removes the centre of the structure and the structure collapses. When Singer commits suicide, the shock is indeed great for the four characters who consider him omniscient, but the shock is no less severe for Singer when he learns of the death of his friend whom he considers omniscient. The shock is far more severe since it leads him to end his life while the other characters though temporarily stunned and confused, continue their frustrated search for love. Mick Kelly is doomed to a life of wage slavery in a ten-cent store. Certainly both economic injustice and sexual discrimination contribute to thwarting Mick as an artist. Still, there is something more which prompts Mick to agree to accept a life of limitation. That something else is her hunger for love, a craving for relationship, which has caught the lonely hunter in a trap: "She was going to work in a ten-cent store and she did not want to work there. It was like she had been trapped into something" (272); "What good was it?... What the hell good was it? All the plans she had made, and the music. When all that came of it was this trap — the store, then home to sleep, and back to the store again" (299).
Doctor Copeland is beaten by a mob of whites when he protested against the injustices meted out to his race, and Jake Blount stumbles off alone, wistfully, to seek a place in the South where he can take hold of a reality through Marxism. Biff Brannon steels himself to live a life of emptiness. Now that Alice is dead, his idea of love has changed, his personal loves are forgotten, and he has come close to Singer's alleged sympathy with all men. In the loneliness of the empty night he tries to reason out "the puzzle of Singer and the rest of them" (305). Suddenly, as he stands "transfixed, lost in his meditations" (306), he has a vision of it all:

... in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valour. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labour and of those who — one word — love .... Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him .... 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. (306)
Here Biff, who had long ago rejected Church and religion, takes up Singer's burden of impersonal love, but he does more than the mute. He judges life soberly, perceiving its contrasting aspects. He is ready to wait, to endure doggedly though the prospects are gloomy.

In conclusion we may say that the theme in this novel is that sense of moral isolation, expressed in terms of loneliness and longing, which is both the social evil of the modern world and the inescapable condition of man.