

Six

6.0

My initiation to hunting was probably irregular. It may even have been corrupt. Even if it turns out the reasons I hunt are ultimately rooted in habits that belong to the most practical aspects of living, in a fundamental participation with ‘the cycle of life,’ and so to the ‘cycle of death’ to which every creature belongs and to which every human creature is subject, I have also found that my motives for hunting have sounded various levels of nostalgia: for a grandfather I loved and mourned; for a place and a time in which there was a better way to live. It may be the case that hunting has been a genuine if somewhat confused effort to be at home in a world that has so often showed up to me as frightening or inhospitable. But when my past becomes explicit and its features plain, then, as if struck by the flash of a great pelagic fish rolling his whitened side into the sunlight, I have realized that I had been holding to the practice with a grip that is not even my own.

I am what is possible for me to be. If I were to say “I am my possibilities,” I would not mean I am either the bag in which my possibilities are kept, or even that I am a bag of possibilities. Here without a wrapper I am. My way to be has to do with being each of my possibilities both together and one at a time. For my way of being is at bottom whole – as long as I am who I am – no matter how incomplete or disjointed I may feel.

To be complete means that I am not something outstanding to which something might be added or subtracted. My wholeness has less to do with the fact that experience changes me than the fact that experience is always mine. I am no longer the person I see in an old photo. But whenever I check, I am who I am. I am never half-myself. I am not only the experiences of my life but also the experiences of my life. I am not merely identical to the experiences through which the world is given. I am also the occasion of these experiences. This

much I have felt leaning towards what is possible for me. I have felt myself to be no matter how disparate or inconsistent any so-called identity I might have glimmers.

6.1

In a small and separate chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael remarks on an obvious feature of the sperm whale's anatomy. An enormous head separates its two eyes. One eye sees to the left and the other to the right. Ishmael is up against the possibility that the whale entertains two absolutely discrete images and the narrator is set to wonder how a world with two faces might constitute experience. Does the whale, because it can see two things at once, also think two things at the same time? Bifurcated consciousness. On the right, she watches a ship work along the horizon with perfect attention and concern and, simultaneously, on the left looks upon her calf, perhaps probing the depths for danger or perhaps in pure adoration. Divided, she has two selves: one for each eye and one for each stream of thought. How then is the unity of the whale to be understood – that the leviathan is (in fact) legion?

I also appear to be one and many. Much less than the unity of the whale, I am unable to comprehend my own unity. My failure to comprehend does not obstruct the fact that I have many ways in which I attempt to express the unity that belongs to the fundamental experience of being me. I offer a word-image that is also a concept:

I am the same.

I have two forward-facing eyes that resolve into a single view with depth. I have binocular vision that gives up a unified view of a dimensional world. I am also my various understandings of the world resolved by a pronoun. I say that I am of two minds. Fractured by desire, I have had the experience of wanting two things – I might even say, at the same time – that seemed to be mutually exclusive. I flit from desire

to desire, from viewpoint to viewpoint, understanding to understanding. But unlike it might be for the whale, I never seem to experience being of two minds simultaneously. Being of two minds is an image. I must imagine being of two minds because I do not experience any frontier between opposed desires. I want a piece of pie. I don't want to gain weight. I am one way and then I am another. I never find myself to be both hungry and full. If desire makes me the same, it also makes me different. Continuity is a concept that cannot comprehend being both happy and sad to see you again. When I think of a million things at once, I do not think a million things at once. I pass from the memory of one thought to the memory of another with great quickness and little apparent order. I think one thing at a time a million times. Thought – and not any I that I may or may not be at any particular moment in the afternoon – thinks one thought at a time. I blink in and out of being. I am as the blinking of the masthead light of a distant sailboat on a broad reach cutting across the faces of offshore rollers. For I am always lonely even if my way to be cannot be isolated from others.

Because I find that I never actually encounter myself as an I-thing from which the I has gained any separation from the rest of itself, the emergence of the I in the mood of the familiar-strange confirms an essential integrity. The multiplicity of who I am is an idea that does not undermine the wholeness of my way to be. It seems very likely that I cannot reach the phenomenon of my own integrity through positive modes of being there. Encountering myself depends on a negative way in which I may be here. Self-encounter suggests that consciousness sometimes blinks like a distant light. Otherwise how would an encounter be possible? Is this logic? It must be that selflessness is also a mode of my way to be, a mode in which I lose view of myself. That such an experience can be *mine* seems to mean that when consciousness rises from a selfless state, I encounter myself and

not someone else. But this may have less to do with being self-same than simply being someone at all.

Of course, the way in which I am is not just one way. I talk about myself as being a doctor or a fireman. Or I say I am angry or silly. And it seems I may be here in modes of attentive not being here at all. One of these modes has been gleaned from a consideration of the self that grows from and then breaks involved activity. Another is simple daydreaming. The possibility that my way to be includes being selfless has led some to suggest that the I does not exist, or that the self is an illusion. For instance, Kant seemed to think that the I that accompanies a thought (a representation) is not, and cannot be an object. Heidegger felt the self was mostly not who one most authentically was. Whatever the self might be, it is strange and lacks every kind of stability.

The experience of my unaccountable emergence out of nothing irritates certain ideas I have about myself as something self-same and continuously present. This irritation can bloom into an actual disruption or may get caught up in the unruly thoughts that percolate through daily consciousness and never quite become an overt conundrum. Any contemplation of the utter vanishing and reappearance of myself would leave me mystified if I ever noticed it, because I would be unable to point out what holds me together. I am together. I am unable to point out the whole I have experienced myself to be. Context is an illusion. How can something completely disappear and then reappear as both something different and the same? Likewise, how can something self-same also be discontinuous? How can I be this and then that, and still always be me? My understanding, like my eyesight, is binocular. The depth of my perception is manifest in parallax. The depth of my understanding seems naturally marked by paradox and irony.

6.2

I have been blown about and corroded by more than fifty years of living. *Who I am* is a story in tatters and shambles. More has been forgotten about me than could possibly be remembered. I have discovered, remembered and then forgotten myself so many times I have no idea who will turn up next. I might find a photograph taken on a trip long forgotten. I am thinking about a man who hired me to build his house in 1973. How he knows me, what he remembers about me eludes me. I have not thought about him for years. Would I recognize him in the street? His contribution to *who I am* seems to have vanished. But I cannot know what is fated to reappear. I might run into my third grade teacher at a bake sale in a town strange to us both. She might tell me something, something long forgotten, about myself over coffee and cupcakes. And I might tell her why I hid under her desk and bit her leg. She might tell me something I never knew. She may show me a picture from 1962.

Not only is most of my story forgotten – or remembered and then forgotten again – a great deal of my story has never been known to me. I am what I say and what is said about me. Suppose I angered a cab driver or a waiter last week and did not notice – will I meet either again? Does it even matter? In the stories they tell, how much of me, how much of how I fit into the world, do they possess? How much of others is in my possession? There is an essential confusion between heaven and earth. I notice only what lies out to the invisible weld of sky and sea. So how do I comprehend the vastness of my impressions and others' impressions of me? I may transcend my intuitions of the sea in a voyage but shall never gain mastery of the ocean by counting the days, weeks or months of my trip, or by feeling the knotted line slip through my fingers. The moment I was capable of a success, I had already grown too old for my victories. It is not only the world that is implicated

in availability. Who I am is also hopelessly mixed up in availability. It is my nature to live in transit upon the surface of a globe, to look to the horizon, to be dispersed by chance and to be known by many names. My way to be does not exhaust itself in a list of feats or facts. Who I am is perhaps best expressed “he was born and he died.” Precisely who I am is like smoke. My finitude is announced in a death that seems surely to be waiting, but also is given by the fact that my way to be is rooted in what is not.

What constitutes who I am is a story that can never be told. There are simply too many holes to fill. And yet I crave that perfect token, that synecdoche, that epic made and sung redeeming all of me, as perhaps Hephaestus redeemed what was available to Achilles’ within the rim of a shield. Even as the clouds that pass by without a thought, who I am gets most closely expressed as a certain kind of story with a particular kind of origin. Who I am, though not exactly a myth, is manifestly myth-like.

Just as I am not given by any story I might like to tell, not every story is a myth. At the very least, a myth must be true. The way a myth is true has been expressed by the adage that a myth was, once upon a time, some one else’s religion. Myth must have the character of having been believed. For this reason, myth has a relation to the real that is always ambiguous – but no more ambiguous, I suppose, than the nature of the real upon which myth makes a claim. Myth we are told is not history. Neither is myth literature even if it is the subject of literature. How could it be? Myth is not, strictly speaking, fiction. It cannot really be invented because it is something handed down. It is a story that is already available in much the same way that who I am is in its availability – who I am is recognized and developed by stories that tell about choices I have made and failed to have made.

If I am known by the various and even inconsistent marks and impressions I make upon the earth and upon my fellows,

so a myth may have a host of variant tellings. Some say it happened in like this, others in another way. Utterly contradictory narratives disclose Helen. She is Helen of Troy, of Egypt, of Lakedaimon. Raped by Athens' greatest hero when she was ten years old, she is the one left bleeding on a rock on the beach near her home. Did she cry? Did the rape lead to ten years of suffering at Ilium's gate? Her sister was so and so. Or somebody else. Her mother? It depends. The myth of Helen is not, strictly speaking, a bundle of stories. It is not a collection. It is somehow each one of its tellings – while one version of the myth is told, an alternate account waits in the wings in perfect silence. Not being. Helen is *who* the myth says she is. She is a complete person acting in a complete world. Helen was taken to Troy. Or was it her image that went to Troy and Helen herself who went to Egypt? Variant tellings do not affect the fact that Helen remains who she is. She is identically who she is even if the plurality of variant stories about her do not agree. She is no more a contradiction than I. The myth of Helen is true, not when I find her bones but when she has actually been handed down to me as who she is. The myth is not one of its variants. It is not even all of its variants. It is each of its variants told one at a time. While old myths have surely been forgotten, new myths long overlooked may yet be discovered in the stacks of an ancient library.

6.3

Self-observation is not without its ambiguities. Foremost, I never actually encounter the one who watches together with another, the one who is being watched. Watching myself is a kind of imagining whereby I become a figment or the subject of my own imagination. *Psyche*, the soul, is a Greek word that also means breath. There are three possibilities. I may lose track of the fact that I am breathing while I do something

else. I may flicker with my breath as I imagine that I am more or less continuously watching the stream of air enter and leave my body. Or I may utterly disappear into an engaged allowing of breath. Self-observation – understood as imagining myself as two – is the invention of the same devil who convinced humanity he did not exist in an effort to keep concealed from me that I am the one who does not exist. Consciousness is the nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus cannot awake.