Aural History

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Preface

I.

The protagonist is twelve years old when her father dies and twenty-seven when her younger brother runs away from home. Between these years the girl is functional, intelligent, reflective, amiable, engaging, serious, and often funny. She makes friends and gets scholarships and helps people, her family primarily, and often in unconventional ways. It is evident to some of the adults she encounters that she’s working too much, and it might be a way of coping, but she does not speak emotionally about herself, and so in spite of how extroverted she can be in public, she is rather shy and self-effacing. She is not depressed or particularly withdrawn. She believes she’s doing her best to make her dead beloved father proud. Everyone agrees that she is a good kid. The only rather unusual feature of these years is that, on three separate occasions, she falls in love with older, tougher, female teachers, but when invited to connect to them she cannot find a way to speak. Throughout these fifteen years, she has a vague, inarticulable sense of being “far away,” but when asked what from? she has no clue and every attempt at therapeutic intervention ends up diagnosing her with “grief.” It’s only when the brother leaves that suddenly she falls apart, a world of needs and feelings exploding like a submarine that has been spit up on the beach. She did not know it at the time, but for fifteen years, the part of herself that told her what she wanted was totally submerged and inaccessible. Where had all these feelings been? Why hadn’t
there been any clues that some vital component of her psychic apparatus was mute and decommissioned?

II.

Sure, there is a burgeoning field of trauma research that tells us, fear affects our brain and freezes us – but really, frozen? For fifteen years?

Besides, she was not emotionally distant, detached, or unrelated. She could empathize with anyone, write stunning essays on her favorite books. She cried at night about how much she missed her dad. The brain cannot be feeling deeply and be deeply frozen at the same time.

Of course, if we turn to Lacan, we learn of misrecognition and that Language is fundamentally self-alienating, but tell me, does this seem like typical self-alienation to you? Lacan says we can’t really “know” our own “desire,” but perhaps we can acknowledge that, developmentally, “desire” is light years away from a more rudimentary self-relation. I think we can agree there is a meaningful distinction between knowing one’s own deepest “desire” versus not knowing what discomfort feels like because you must believe that everything is fine.

In the world of psychotherapy, it has become so popular to talk about “dissociation,” but that’s describing a mechanism whereby parts of the self are split off from self-awareness, whereas what we’re seeing in the girl is an entire psychic apparatus totally unplugged.

How do we understand the intractability of the inner signal’s absolute deactivation? The systematic failure of talk-therapy to notice that some crucial feature of an affective and reactive self was gone?

This is the mystery Aural History sets out to recreate.

III.

It’s likely that in spite of your most benevolent readerly intentions, you will not feel connected to the girl on the page. How could you?

Her primary mechanism of self-relation is fatally impaired.
Turns out, even though we tolerate a range of narrators, we still expect them to, at the very least, narrate, and, because narrative is driven by perspective on one’s experience, and because it’s precisely the loss of emotional reflexivity that destroys the girl’s access to perspective, she cannot walk us through her own erasure.

 Whereas traditionally memoir depends upon restoring and reconstructing feelings that we assume we must have had (even if at the time we didn’t necessarily know precisely what our feelings were), Aural History reenacts what happens to a narrator when her feelings are neither known, nor even ever had.

 What kind of experimental form can dramatize the self’s evaporation?

 Is it still technically a “memoir” if instead of getting closer to the self, we watch it bear its own repudiation?

 When a memoir is a ghost story, what genre are we in?

 IV.

 As a thirty-something scholar of queer theory, I am trained to say there’s really no such thing as a “true self.” But as a practicing clinician, I hear wrenching stories centered on the pain of how a “truth” was breached, the mystery of moments when the “self” somehow submitted to its violation.

 What is the injunction “know thyself” without the threat of self-betrayal?

 V.

 To explain the times we found ourselves endangered, we say: we had been motivated by hard feelings — of despair, anxiety, restlessness, devastation.

 i. That job we sabotaged without really remembering why;

 ii. That year we drank ourselves to sleep each night even though we were sure we hated alcohol;

 iii. That period of putting our bodies in conditions we would otherwise find reckless and enraging.
Later, we look back, and in some mix of horror and confusion, maybe compassion too, we say, it must have been depression driving us headlong toward that cliff, we must have been self-hating. With gratitude for our narrow escape, we insist that we were acting out of feelings that we had but couldn’t appropriately handle.

There is something comforting about this explanation.

Even our peril is a tragedy that, by indirectly causing, we control.

What if instead we said: sometimes we lose ourselves without ever surrendering.

What if instead we said: it is not our feelings that are dangerous, but instead, the absence of a self-relation, the bewildering and temporary inability to feel what we are feeling.

What if we said: we are not always willfully destructive; sometimes we move as though under a spell, and then, somehow, we are awakened.

What makes the psyche fall asleep?

VI.

It is no longer scandalous to say that a vast majority of psychic life occurs unconsciously.

When in 1916, Freud reflected on the “wound” that his discovery of the “unconscious” would inflict on man’s “naïve self-love,” he compared his findings to the Copernican Revolution in which humankind was forced to recognize that, contrary to our grandiose presuppositions, “our earth was not the center of the universe.” Just as astronomical science dismissed the ancient myth of the earth’s special centrality by demonstrating that it actually revolved around the sun, so too, Freud showed, the mind was not the pinnacle of sovereign self-control but actually the riven product of unseen and anarchic forces.

But if once upon a time this revelation of our limitations seemed it would irreparably “wound” us, today, we are so modern, we are so utterly enlightened, we don’t so much as flinch to

hear that consciousness can be misleading, that we might really hate the friend we claim to love, crave the cruelty we feel torments us, keep secrets from ourselves, attach to people that we cannot want or shouldn’t, be defensive.

Indeed, is it not an emblem of modernity to draw the shape of knowledge by the trace of its concessions, to say, alongside Freud, the “ego is not the master in his own house,” that if consciousness is like an iceberg, we, as moderns, acquiesce to seeing nothing but the narrow tip?

VII.

So let us say we are Copernican and modest: does having a deep “unconscious” really explain the ease and speed with which we, somehow unaware, are susceptible to overriding our deepest needs and wishes?

i. I’m thinking of relationships that seemed okay while we were in them, and when they ended, it suddenly seemed clear that, in fact, all along some essential inner voice was missing that rendered us strangely muted and complicit.

ii. I’m thinking of encounters that seemed un-reckless when we did them, and only later recognized that even if “technically” we had “agreed,” there were some basic signals of desire that were precluded, absent, mysteriously forbidden.

Is it really descriptively honest to keep insisting that even things we can’t remember willing are actually expressions of a feeling that we bad or wanted?

What about the difference between not-knowing our true feelings, and not having them at all?

The familiar philosophical claim that humankind is doomed to somber ignorance is oh so grand and transcendental that it for-

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gets the fundamental difference between Absolutely Knowing your “Soul” and generally being able to feel what you’re experiencing.

Put another way, you may not always know for sure whether you love or hate your mother. But your dynamic psychic functioning depends upon a voice that indicates to you the possible reactions that, in any given moment, you may be having.

VIII.

This is not a voice as in a “command” that you obey, but more like a private, internal signal that tells your somewhat conscious mind what you’re affectively experiencing.

i. You run into someone and start talking and midway through, you start to think, “oh god I’m so annoyed, when can I plot my exit out of here.”

ii. You’re on a date and wondering, “I think I feel uncomfortable, maybe this person’s not my type, or I’m just in a cranky mood, whatever.”

iii. Or maybe you are yawning and you think, “I must be tired now, I didn’t realize” or “I don’t know why I’m sad but something isn’t feeling right.”

There is a channel between what we are aware of, on the one hand, and our psycho-affective life on the other, and every psyche has a messenger that ferries communications from our sensory experience to our conscious mind.

So if there is a signal, can’t a signal be impaired? Can it disappear completely?

And what happens when – because it is a signal – you cannot recognize its absence until it’s back to work again? And then you wonder: how could I not have known I was so miserable for all those anguished years? What was I doing every time I smiled and really felt it was okay?

Is it really incidental that the language used for this phenomena typically involves the phrase, “I lost myself,” or was “untrue” to what I wanted?
IX.

Of course, once god is dead and the ego is dethroned, we are supposedly immune to the pathos of self-losing. Our well-honed postmodern scorn for the quaint promise of “true selfhood” – on the grounds that ideological interpellation is pervasive and the “self” is hopeless because so thoroughly “socially” constructed – provides us sexy abstract claims that stall in debates so vague and hyperbolic: the subject is or isn’t dead? the subject is performing or divided? such that you’d almost (wrongly) think there is One, True, unit of measuring Selfhood that can represent the vast and complex range of what it means for the dynamic “self” to have a body/psyche in the context of interpersonal life.

After all, is it coincidental that so many examples of self-estrangement involve our relationship to other people, and if so, what does this indicate about how relationships structure and determine our elemental access to ourselves?

Do certain external conditions exacerbate our vulnerability to being self-abandoned?

Is sex a privileged scene of self-undoing?

What is the role of trauma in acute or systematic self-betrayal?

How do we represent a psychological phenomenon that – by definition – is not emotionally accessible until after the broken inner signal has been sufficiently restored?

X.

For all our supposed surrender to being Copernican and “decentered,” we have, as yet, barely considered the implications of having a psychic system that revolves around the needs and dreams of other minds. What if we are susceptible therefore to pulls we can’t feel moving us, to possible eclipse?

XI.

*Aural History* is an attempt to capture an event of self-annihilation that in the length of its duration and peculiar manner of manifestation, offers an extreme account of what it means to lose yourself, and have no way to know it.
I am a girl who did not want to be king

In the game we are playing, the king is my father and I am his daughter,

the prince.

My father is king and I am his prince.

My father, my king, in the game we are playing, you live forever and I’ll stay your girlchild, adorable.

I am a child when he hands me the keys.

The game was not over.

The kingdom in flames.

And I said, father, can’t you I see I’m burning?

My father, the king, answers nothing.

Why do we say when the king is dead, long live the king?

David was a shepherd boy appointed in the desert, first anointed in the dark.
I am the girl who is only a prince, who is only a girl.

I am the girl who once was a king.

 Enumerable