

*Also by Oliver Sacks*

MIGRAINE

AWAKENINGS

A LEG TO STAND ON

SEEING VOICES

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS

THE ISLAND OF THE COLORBLIND AND CYCAD ISLAND

OLIVER SACKS

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The MAN  
Who  
MISTOOK  
HIS WIFE  
for  
a HAT

*and other clinical tales*

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To Leonard Shengold, M.D.



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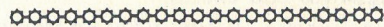
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## A Matter of Identity

'What'll it be today?' he says, rubbing his hands. 'Half a pound of Virginia, a nice piece of Nova?'

(Evidently he saw me as a customer—he would often pick up the phone on the ward, and say 'Thompson's Delicatessen'.)

'Oh Mr Thompson!' I exclaim. 'And who do you think I am?'

'Good heavens, the light's bad—I took you for a customer. As if it isn't my old friend Tom Pitkins . . . Me and Tom' (he whispers in an aside to the nurse) 'was always going to the races together.'

'Mr Thompson, you are mistaken again.'

'So I am,' he rejoins, not put out for a moment. 'Why would you be wearing a white coat if you were Tom? You're Hymie, the kosher butcher next door. No bloodstains on your coat though. Business bad today? You'll look like a slaughterhouse by the end of the week!'

Feeling a bit swept away myself in this whirlpool of identities, I finger the stethoscope dangling from my neck.

'A stethoscope!' he exploded. 'And you pretending to be Hymie! You mechanics are all starting to fancy yourselves to be doctors, what with your white coats and stethoscopes—as if you need a stethoscope to listen to a car! So, you're my old friend Manners from the Mobil station up the block, come in to get your boloney-and-rye . . .'

William Thompson rubbed his hands again, in his salesman-grocer's gesture, and looked for the counter. Not finding it, he looked at me strangely again.

'Where am I?' he said, with a sudden scared look. 'I thought I

was in my shop, doctor. My mind must have wandered . . . You'll be wanting my shirt off, to sound me as usual?'

'No, not the usual. I'm *not* your usual doctor.'

'Indeed you're not. I could see that straightaway! You're not my usual chest-thumping doctor. And, by God, you've a beard! You look like Sigmund Freud—have I gone bonkers, round the bend?'

'No, Mr Thompson. Not round the bend. Just a little trouble with your memory—difficulties remembering and recognising people.'

'My memory has been playing me some tricks,' he admitted. 'Sometimes I make mistakes—I take somebody for somebody else . . . What'll it be now—Nova or Virginia?'

So it would happen, with variations, every time—with improvisations, always prompt, often funny, sometimes brilliant, and ultimately tragic. Mr Thompson would identify me—misidentify, pseudo-identify me—as a dozen different people in the course of five minutes. He would whirl, fluently, from one guess, one hypothesis, one belief, to the next, without any appearance of uncertainty at any point—he never knew who I was, or what and where *he* was, an ex-grocer, with severe Korsakov's, in a neurological institution.

He remembered nothing for more than a few seconds. He was continually disoriented. Abysses of amnesia continually opened beneath him, but he would bridge them, nimbly, by fluent confabulations and fictions of all kinds. For him they were not fictions, but how he suddenly saw, or interpreted, the world. Its radical flux and incoherence could not be tolerated, acknowledged, for an instant—there was, instead, this strange, delirious, quasi-coherence, as Mr Thompson, with his ceaseless, unconscious, quick-fire inventions, continually improvised a world around him—an Arabian Nights world, a phantasmagoria, a dream, of ever-changing people, figures, situations—continual, kaleidoscopic mutations and transformations. For Mr Thompson, however, it was not a tissue of ever-changing, evanescent fancies and illusion, but a wholly normal, stable and factual world. So far as *he* was concerned, there was nothing the matter.

On one occasion, Mr Thompson went for a trip, identifying himself at the front desk as 'the Revd. William Thompson', ordering a taxi, and taking off for the day. The taxi-driver, whom we later spoke to, said he had never had so fascinating a passenger, for Mr Thompson told him one story after another, amazing personal stories full of fantastic adventures. 'He seemed to have been everywhere, done everything, met everyone. I could hardly believe so much was possible in a single life,' he said. 'It is not exactly a single life,' we answered. 'It is all very curious—a matter of identity.'\*

Jimmie G., another Korsakov's patient, whom I have already described at length (Chapter Two), had long since *cooled down* from his acute Korsakov's syndrome, and seemed to have settled into a state of permanent lostness (or, perhaps, a permanent now-seeming dream or reminiscence of the past). But Mr Thompson, only just out of hospital—his Korsakov's had exploded just three weeks before, when he developed a high fever, raved, and ceased to recognise all his family—was still on the boil, was still in an almost frenzied confabulatory delirium (of the sort sometimes called 'Korsakov's psychosis', though it is not really a psychosis at all), continually creating a world and self, to replace what was continually being forgotten and lost. Such a frenzy may call forth quite brilliant powers of invention and fancy—a veritable confabulatory genius—for such a patient *must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment*. We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a 'narrative', and that this narrative is us, our identities.

If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story—his real, inmost story?'—for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions,

\*A very similar story is related by Luria in *The Neuropsychology of Memory* (1976), in which the spell-bound cabdriver only realised that his exotic passenger was ill when he gave him, for a fare, a temperature chart he was holding. Only then did he realise that this Scheherazade, this spinner of 1001 tales, was one of 'those strange patients' at the Neurological Institute.

our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique.

To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.

This narrative need, perhaps, is the clue to Mr Thompson's desperate tale-telling, his verbosity. Deprived of continuity, of a quiet, continuous, inner narrative, he is driven to a sort of narrative frenzy—hence his ceaseless tales, his confabulations, his mythomania. Unable to maintain a genuine narrative or continuity, unable to maintain a genuine inner world, he is driven to the proliferation of pseudo-narratives, in a pseudo-continuity, pseudo-worlds peopled by pseudo-people, phantoms.

What is it *like* for Mr Thompson? Superficially, he comes over as an ebullient comic. People say, 'He's a riot.' And there is much that is farcical in such a situation, which might form the basis of a comic novel.\* It is comic, but not just comic—it is terrible as well. For here is a man who, in some sense, is desperate, in a frenzy. The world keeps disappearing, losing meaning, vanishing—and he must seek meaning, *make* meaning, in a desperate way, continually inventing, throwing bridges of meaning over abysses of meaninglessness, the chaos that yawns continually beneath him.

But does Mr Thompson himself know this, feel this? After finding him 'a riot', 'a laugh', 'loads of fun', people are disquieted,

\*Indeed such a novel has been written. Shortly after 'The Lost Mariner' (Chapter Two) was published, a young writer named David Gilman sent me the manuscript of his book *Croppy Boy*, the story of an amnesiac like Mr Thompson, who enjoys the wild and unbridled license of creating identities, new selves, as he whims, and as he must—an astonishing imagination of an amnesiac genius, told with positively Joycean richness and gusto. I do not know whether it has been published; I am very sure it should be. I could not help wondering whether Mr Gilman had actually met (and studied) a 'Thompson'—as I have often wondered whether Borges' 'Funes', so uncannily similar to Luria's Mnemonist, may have been based on a personal encounter with such a mnemonist.

even terrified, by something in him. 'He never stops', they say. 'He's like a man in a race, a man trying to catch something which always eludes him.' And, indeed, he can never stop running, for the breach in memory, in existence, in meaning, is never healed, but has to be bridged, to be 'patched', every second. And the bridges, the patches, for all their brilliance, fail to work—because they *are* confabulations, fictions, which cannot do service for reality, while also failing to correspond with reality. Does Mr Thompson feel *this*? Or, again, what *is* his 'feeling of reality'? Is he in a torment all the while—the torment of a man lost in unreality, struggling to rescue himself, but sinking himself, by ceaseless inventions, illusions, themselves quite unreal? It is certain that he is not at ease—there is a tense, taut look on his face all the while, as of a man under ceaseless inner pressure; and occasionally, not too often, or masked if present, a look of open, naked, pathetic bewilderment. What saves Mr Thompson in a sense, and in another sense damns him, is the forced or defensive superficiality of his life: the way in which it is, in effect, reduced to a surface, brilliant, shimmering, iridescent, ever-changing, but for all that a surface, a mass of illusions, a delirium, without depth.

And with this, no feeling *that* he has lost feeling (for the feeling he has lost), no feeling *that* he has lost the depth, that unfathomable, mysterious, myriad-levelled depth which somehow defines identity or reality. This strikes everyone who has been in contact with him for any time—that under his fluency, even his frenzy, is a strange loss of feeling—that feeling, or judgment, which distinguishes between 'real' and 'unreal', 'true' and 'untrue' (one cannot speak of 'lies' here, only of 'non-truth'), important and trivial, relevant or irrelevant. What comes out, torrentially, in his ceaseless confabulation, has, finally, a peculiar quality of indifference . . . as if it didn't really matter what he said, or what anyone else did or said; as if nothing really mattered any more.

A striking example of this was presented one afternoon, when William Thompson, jabbering away, of all sorts of people who were improvised on the spot, said: 'And there goes my younger brother, Bob, past the window', in the same, excited but even and indifferent tone, as the rest of his monologue. I was dumbfounded

when, a minute later, a man peeked round the door, and said: 'I'm Bob, I'm his younger brother—I think he saw me passing by the window.' Nothing in William's tone or manner—nothing in his exuberant, but unvarying and indifferent, style of monologue—had prepared me for the possibility of . . . reality. William spoke of his brother, who *was* real, in precisely the same tone, or lack of tone, in which he spoke of the unreal—and now, suddenly, out of the phantoms, a real figure appeared! Further, he did not treat his younger brother as 'real'—did not display any real emotion, was not in the least oriented or delivered from his delirium—but, on the contrary, instantly treated his brother *as* unreal, effacing him, losing him, in a further whirl of delirium—utterly different from the rare but profoundly moving times when Jimmie G. (see Chapter Two) met *his* brother, and while with him was unlost. This was intensely disconcerting to poor Bob—who said 'I'm Bob, not Rob, not Dob', to no avail whatever. In the midst of confabulations—perhaps some strand of memory, of remembered kinship, or identity, was still holding (or came back for an instant)—William spoke of his *elder* brother, George, using his invariable present indicative tense.

'But George died nineteen years ago!' said Bob, aghast.

'Aye, George is always the joker!' William quipped, apparently ignoring, or indifferent to, Bob's comment, and went on blathering of George in his excited, dead way, insensitive to truth, to reality, to propriety, to everything—insensitive too to the manifest distress of the living brother before him.

It was this which convinced me, above everything, that there was some ultimate and total loss of inner reality, of feeling and meaning, of soul, in William—and led me to ask the Sisters, as I had asked them of Jimmie G. 'Do you think William *has* a soul? Or has he been pithed, scooped-out, de-souled, by disease?'

This time, however, they looked worried by my question, as if something of the sort were already in their minds: they could not say 'Judge for yourself. See Willie in Chapel', because his wise-cracking, his confabulations continued even there. There is an utter pathos, a sad *sense* of lostness, with Jimmie G. which one does not feel, or feel directly, with the effervescent Mr Thompson.

Jimmie has *moods*, and a sort of brooding (or, at least, yearning) sadness, a depth, a soul, which does not seem to be present in Mr Thompson. Doubtless, as the Sisters said, he had a soul, an immortal soul, in the theological sense; could be seen, and loved, as an individual by the Almighty; but, they agreed, something very disquieting had happened to him, to his spirit, his character, in the ordinary, human sense.

It is *because* Jimmie is 'lost' that he *can* be redeemed or found, at least for a while, in the mode of a genuine emotional relation. Jimmie is in despair, a quiet despair (to use or adapt Kierkegaard's term), and therefore he has the possibility of salvation, of touching base, the ground of reality, the feeling and meaning he has lost, but still recognises, still yearns for . . .

But for William—with his brilliant, brassy surface, the unending joke which he substitutes for the world (which if it covers over a desperation, is a desperation he does not feel); for William with his manifest indifference to relation and reality caught in an unending verbosity, there may be nothing 'redeeming' at all—his confabulations, his apparitions, his frantic search for meanings, being the ultimate barrier to any meaning.

Paradoxically, then, William's great gift—for confabulation—which has been called out to leap continually over the ever-opening abyss of amnesia—William's great gift is also his damnation. If only he could be *quiet*, one feels, for an instant; if only he could stop the ceaseless chatter and jabber; if only he could relinquish the deceiving surface of illusions—then (ah then!) reality might seep in; something genuine, something deep, something true, something felt, could enter his soul.

For it is not memory which is the final, 'existential' casualty here (although his memory is wholly devastated); it is not memory only which has been so altered in him, but some ultimate capacity for feeling which is gone; and this is the sense in which he is 'de-souled'.

Luria speaks of such indifference as 'equalisation'—and sometimes seems to see it as the ultimate pathology, the final destroyer of any world, any self. It exerted, I think, a horrified fascination on him, as well as constituting an ultimate therapeutic challenge. He was drawn back to this theme again and again—sometimes in

relation to Korsakov's and memory, as in *The Neuropsychology of Memory*, more often in relation to frontal-lobe syndromes, especially in *Human Brain and Psychological Processes*, which contains several full-length case-histories of such patients, fully comparable in their terrible coherence and impact to 'the man with a shattered world'—comparable, and, in a way, more terrible still, because they depict patients who do not realise that anything has befallen them, patients who have lost their own reality, without knowing it, patients who may not suffer, but be the most God-forsaken of all. Zazetsky (in *The Man with a Shattered World*) is constantly described as a *fighter*, always (even passionately) conscious of his state, and always fighting 'with the tenacity of the damned' to recover the use of his damaged brain. But William (like Luria's frontal-lobe patients—see next chapter) is so damned he does not know he is damned, for it is not just a faculty, or some faculties, which are damaged, but the very citadel, the self, the soul itself. William is 'lost', in this sense, far more than Jimmie—for all his brio; one never feels, or rarely feels, that there is a *person* remaining, whereas in Jimmie there is plainly a real, moral being, even if disconnected most of the time. In Jimmie, at least, re-connection is *possible*—the therapeutic challenge can be summed up as 'Only connect'.

Our efforts to 're-connect' William all fail—even increase his confabulatory pressure. But when we abdicate our efforts, and let him be, he sometimes wanders out into the quiet and undemanding garden which surrounds the Home, and there, in its quietness, he recovers his own quiet. The presence of others, other people, excite and rattle him, force him into an endless, frenzied, social chatter, a veritable delirium of identity-making and -seeking; the presence of plants, a quiet garden, the non-human order, making no social or human demands upon him, allow this identity-delirium to relax, to subside; and by their quiet, non-human self-sufficiency and completeness allow him a rare quietness and self-sufficiency of his own, by offering (beneath, or beyond, all merely human identities and relations) a deep wordless communion with Nature itself, and with this the restored sense of being in the world, being real.