

**Transcendence on the Cut-Rate:
A Friendly Critique of Oliver Sacks' 'The Lost Mariner'**

‘Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing.’ (Luis Bunuel)

“[A] man does not consist of memory alone. He has feeling, will, sensibilities, moral being—matters of which neurology cannot speak.” (Alexander Luria)

1. Introduction

A reader might initially fail to notice it, but Oliver Sacks' well-known essay, “The Lost Mariner,” is a philosophical conversion storyⁱ in which he recounts his transfiguration from a begrudging advocate of Bunuel's credo ‘without [memory] we are nothing’ to a heartened disciple of Luria's belief that a person ‘does not consist of memory alone’.

In this essay, Sacks, the well-regarded neurologist and author, poignantly describes the mental devastation wrought by alcohol-induced Korsakov's syndrome on 49-year-old Jimmie G, who vividly recollects the first nineteen years of his life but suffers from a ‘dense amnesia’ concerning the most recent thirty years and whose short-term memories are ‘fugitive in the extreme’, almost invariably persisting for less than a minute. Initially, Sacks despairs that the ‘memoryless’ Jimmie is a ‘lost soul’. In due time, he changes his mind, both about Jimmie's life prospects and about the relative power and limits of empirical science.

Sacks' essay is delightfully insightful. That said - to put things bluntly - I'll argue Sacks is guilty of being philosophically impetuous. Among other logically hasty inferences, he makes an argument that invests the human psyche with a particular, romanticist-style disposition to authentic transcendent experience, but does so – evidentially speaking – on the cheap.

2. The Test Case

49-year old Jimmie is intelligent, analytical, and affable. However mentally devastating, his malady has not vitiated these strengths. His long-term memory intact, Jimmie recalls his upbringing, high school science, and early years in the Navy with enthusiasm and striking specificity. Jimmie is excellent at strategy games such as checkers, so long as the game's moves are made quickly. His demeanor is often friendly and chatty: “Hiya, Doc . . . You're a doctor, right?”

When met, though, by the ordinary scenes of his present life in the Home for the Aged (where Sacks worked), Jimmie is almost invariably 'lost'. Every morning, Jimmie wakes up unfamiliar with his whereabouts, almost utterly ignorant of the identity of his long-serving nurses. Every time Jimmie meets with Sacks, it's as if it were their first meeting. Presented with a mirror, Jimmie is horrified when, expecting to see a teenager's face, he confronts a lightly graying older man. Jimmie thinks it's 1945 when it's 1975. Imagine suffering from such dissonance. Jimmie does so time and again throughout the day, though – is it a small mercy? – he's unconscious of the endless recurrence.

Jimmie sometimes labors to understand what's happening to him. Context cues provide hints to Jimmie about where he is, a hospital of some kind. But he doesn't feel sick and can't imagine why he's there. To help him understand, Sacks can tell Jimmie a joke about a patient who comes in because of memory lapses, but forgets why she's at the doctor. Jimmie is sharp enough to catch the jest's meaning; but his self-awareness is momentary, and the newfound recognition of what ails him slips out of the back of his mind within thirty seconds.

It's difficult to know precisely what Jimmie's life feels like to him from the inside. One suspects it's often exhausting. Jimmie retains a desire to know what's happening to him; his occasional fits of anxiety suggest this, at least. Jimmie has sensory experiences and logical reasoning abilities. Every situation potentially becomes a complex puzzle in need of solving. In other words, Jimmie can't – like the rest of us – rest easy in his memory-based awareness of what's happening. To the degree he desires for things to make sense to him, Jimmie's mind needs to be (we might say) in persistent "investigation mode." What a psychic toll must it take?ⁱⁱ

Jimmie's ability to feel, or at least to identify how he feels, is seriously enervated. On the rare occasions Jimmie sees his brother, he has genuinely deep emotional experiences, though he can't understand why his brother looks so old. (Confusion infects even these positive experiences.) Fear is available to Jimmie; he knows he's agitated and frightened when confronted with a mirror. But in other moments, when Jimmie is asked how he feels – "happy or sad?" – he simply doesn't know. To identify an emotion, contextual information is necessary. If I've lost a loved one, I recognize my present feelings as grief. If someone's recently slighted me, indignation. Cut off from awareness of his immediate past, it's not surprising Jimmie doesn't know what to make of his internal experience: 'I can't say I've felt happy in a long time'.

To sum up, setting aside fleeting episodes of nostalgia or the occasional meet up with his brother, Jimmie's "day-to-day" experience consists in an ever-sliding, thirty second or so blip of awareness of his immediate physical surroundings, bookended by a haze of almost total unknowing.

Interestingly, Sacks chronicles that Jimmie's thinking becomes characterized by an odd mixture of awareness and lack of awareness. Sacks describes Jimmie as falling into a general mood of 'unconcern'. Is this dissociated attitude due purely to a mental fatigue?

To some hazy, inarticulable awareness of what's happening to him? Something else? It's hard to tell.

3. Sacks' Attempts to Help

As it becomes increasingly clear that Jimmie has Korsakov's, a syndrome with no cure, Sacks turns his attention from diagnosis to mitigating the disease's devastating effects.

Sacks' first plan was to find something in which Jimmie could take pride. Jimmie values his analytical skill, and puzzles are a way for him to revel in this old talent.

Unfortunately, however sharp Jimmie is, endless puzzling leaves him emotionally cold. Puzzles are mere child's play.

Meaning can be found in useful work. Hence, Sacks tries to find something purposeful for Jimmie to do. Since Jimmie would struggle to learn new skills, it'd need to be purposeful work he already has an aptitude for. Having learned how to 'touch type' while in the Navy, Jimmie was put to typing out doctor's notes. This second plan didn't work, either. Jimmie could do the work, but he couldn't see much meaning in it, whether because typing seems of trivial importance or (as Sacks supposes) because the sentences seemed to come, one after another, without any identifiable coherence or broader importance to feeble-memoried Jimmie.

Sacks' third plan is to have Jimmie keep a diary. The idea: recording his day-to-day activity might help Jimmie recognize what Korsakov obscures, the narrative arc of his life. But instead of helping to circumvent the effects of Korsakov's, the disease ruins the plan. Not only does Jimmie forget he has a diary, when he does occasionally scribble entries, they are narratively trivial: 'eating breakfast'. Korsakov's eviscerates Jimmie's capacity to see the momentary events he experiences as embedded in any extended life story, and so the diary can't help him construct a diachronic picture of his recent life.

Clearly, Sacks hopes to help Jimmie find – episodically if not persistently – a sense of meaning, a feeling of deep connection to some person or project, a conception of the narrative continuity of his life, or some mixture of these. Sacks' hopes become dashed.

It's worth noting – Sacks doesn't explicitly – that Jimmie's life situation compounds the immediate psychological effects of Korsakov's. In a postscript, Sacks describes another Korsakov's patient, Stephen, who lives with his caring wife in the home they've inhabited since before the onset of his disease. Though Stephen is occasionally set off when something - a new set of drapes, say - doesn't cohere with his long-term memories, he is generally calm; almost always in familiar environs, Stephen feels at home. The occasions of dissonance are minimized. By contrast, Jimmie is almost invariably cut off from his past. The Connecticut town he fondly remembers growing up in has changed dramatically; in any case he's living in the unfamiliar Home. More, Jimmie's brother, who lives across the country, seems to be the only family member who is a part of Jimmie's life. Unlike for Stephen, there is very little in Jimmie's immediate surroundings that ties him to his remembered past. The upshot: Jimmie's occasional fond feelings must seem, even to him, nostalgia, not immediate connection.

4. The Case for Bunuel

These various reflections add significant evidential weight to Bunuel's despondent remark, 'without [memory] we are nothing'. Unable to retain information for more than a minute, Jimmie is incapable of forming and sustaining new friendships; of forming intentions and correlated plans he can then execute; of doing sustained tasks meaningful to him; of understanding, and so of deeply relating to, himself.

Naturally, Sacks asks himself, "were there depths in this unmemoried man, depths of an abiding feeling, and thinking, or had [Jimmie] been reduced to a sort of Humean drivel, a mere succession of unrelated impressions and events?" At first, following the spirit of Bunuel's remark, Sacks answers "no depths" – and he despairs.

Of course, Bunuel's claim that a person "is" his memories is, strictly speaking, overstated. Among many other mental capacities, Jimmie retains his perceptual abilities, his logical reasoning ability, latent emotional capacity, and psychological needs. But without short-term memory beliefs, Jimmie can't identify any but the crudest emotional experiences within himself or set himself to accomplish any but the quickest and generally trivial goals. These judgments would seem to render Bunuel's remarks about the relationship between memory and self (what we might call) "fully warranted exaggerations" born of fully justified exasperation. Bunuel's remark certainly captures deep truths about Jimmie's internal life and his severely diminished capacity to live a recognizably human life, a life meaningful to him.

5. Sacks' "Philosophical Conversion"

Despair does not receive the final word in Sacks.

Urged by nuns (who worked at the Home) to observe Jimmie in Catholic mass, Sacks finds Jimmie to be uncharacteristically calm and attentive during the service – a serenity that persists hours after Jimmie has thoroughly forgotten he took communion. Sacks also sees a 'different man' when he watches Jimmie work in the Home's garden, which, Sacks comes to think, Jimmie fashions after gardens he recollected from his cherished childhood.

On the basis of these two episodes, Sacks changes his mind about Jimmie's prospects for connection, meaning, and engagement. In rather florid language, Sacks surmises Jimmie was, in the moments that make up mass and gardening, 'absorbed in an act, an act of his whole being, which carried feeling and meaning in an organic continuity and unity, a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break'. In Sacks' estimation, only 'emotional and spiritual attention' through the 'contemplation' of nature, art, and music made Jimmie 'attentive to the beauty and soul of the world', and such attention enlists, Sacks claims, not merely the human mind, but the human soul.

More, Sacks seeks the 'philosophical lesson' to be drawn from 'memoryless' Jimmie's ability to have positive experiences in mass and in the garden. In this vein, Sacks draws several striking conclusions about the limits of empirical science and the powers of the

human soul. As Sacks puts it, ‘empirical science told’ him that Jimmie was condemned to be ‘a sort of Humean froth, a meaningless fluttering on the surface of life’, for ‘empirical science, empiricism, takes no account of the soul’ and its ability to provide each of us, even ‘memoryless’ Jimmie, with ‘the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, by communion, by touching the human spirit’. In brief, Sacks replaces, in his own soul, a thorough-going empiricism with a form of romanticism.

6. Hard Questions and Initial Objections

To be fair, ‘The Lost Mariner’ isn’t a philosophical treatise. Perhaps it will seem nit-picky and philosophically officious to hold Sacks to rigorous argumentative standards he doesn’t aspire to. But Sacks’ description of his philosophical conversion – which, though exuberantly expressed, seems rushed – naturally prompts hard questions. (I know from experience, namely, from discussing this essay with bright, Honors students at my university.) Why not consider how best to address, in Sacks’ own searching spirit, these hard questions? Let’s pick up Sacks’ dialectic and take it another few steps – beginning with a critique of what he’s said.

First, it’s natural to ask whether there are – in addition to Sacks’ romanticist account – other plausible explanations of Jimmie’s atypical demeanor within (and after) attending mass and tending the garden.

It’s not difficult to imagine several. If Jimmie grew up a mass-goer, we might plausibly speculate that mass provides a calming respite, perhaps for several distinct reasons. In most situations, if Jimmie yearns to understand what’s happening to him, it’s mentally taxing for him to be persistently in (what I earlier called) “investigation mode.” If familiarity with mass is preserved in Jimmie’s long-term memory, his analytical faculties can “shut off” for an hour or so during the service. (Explanation for Jimmie’s calm bearing: he’s in an unusual state of mental rest.) More, if we recall Sacks’ concern that Jimmie’s life lacks a narrative arc; the highly structured order of mass would permit Jimmie the (fairly rare) sense he actually knows what’s coming next. (Calm: the unusual absence of confusion.) More yet, since we are able to recognize from Jimmie’s highly emotional episodes with his brother that he’s fully capable of deep feeling when long-term memory permits him to enter into a space of mutually entangled knowing, we might wonder whether Jimmie has a similar deep, emotional relationship with the Catholic faith and so with the animating spirit and particular logic of Catholic mass. (Calm and attention: a brief episode of long-term-memory-inflected meaning.)

Of course, these several explanations are not logically inconsistent with Sacks’ belief that Jimmie is tapping into a memory-independent aspect of himself, or into a self-transcendent reality such as Beauty. But noting these several (plausible) explanations can make Sacks’ romanticist explanation seem undermotivated and intellectually extravagant. That’s the essence of my “transcendence on the cut-rate” objection.

For the reader who fixates – as I’m presently doing – on the strict cogency of Sacks’ “inferential leap” to romanticism, it will seem troubling that Sacks doesn’t seem to ask,

or at least doesn't relate to his readers the answers to, several salient questions: How did Jimmie himself speak of his experience within mass? Was it meaningful to him?, Merely restful?, Did he find in himself merely small pleasures (such as the exhilaration of anticipating the lyrics of a song he wouldn't have been able to recite, if asked)? Or did he regard himself as in the throes of more deeply grounded joys?

A second and related objection is that Jimmie isn't, if we hope to discern whether "memory is absolutely necessary for an experience of meaning," the optimal test case, for his memory isn't completely blank. When Jimmie experiences episodes of connection or meaning, a critical observer can sensibly wonder whether Jimmie's long-term memory is, perhaps in subtle ways, a crucial factor in the meaning-generation. And not only are long-term memories preserved in Jimmie, there are also intimations in Jimmie's life of a secondary memory, an inarticulable recognition of new information.ⁱⁱⁱ This capacity could also be a crucial factor in Jimmie's experiences of connection and meaning.^{iv}

Third, as a test case for the "limits" of natural science, Jimmie's life is otiose. We needn't reflect on the devastating effects of Korsakov's to recognize the need to transcend the knowledge we receive from empirical science to give credible answers to questions about the sources of meaning in life, or about the value of narrative to personal identity.^v What precisely had Sacks expected to discern from neuroscience? Why had he been so tempted in the first place by a rather naïve form of positivism?

7. What to Make of the Objections?

What to make of these objections? Instead of addressing them by trying to argue for the cogency of a rejiggered or amped up, "Sacks'-style" inference that it's "necessary" to go beyond the "less extravagant" explanations I've suggested (and to adopt a romanticist or other non-empiricist explanation), I'd like to step back and consider the intellectual subtext, the underlying dialectic, of Sacks' essay.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor speaks of how common 'subtraction stories' are within modernity. A subtraction story is an account of human mentality according to which, whenever we subtract the "superstitions" from a person's mindset (her belief, say, in miracles or God), what's left behind is the secular, the reasonable, and the natural, a set of ideas she would have naturally come to if only she hadn't been sidetracked by, say, a religious upbringing.^{vi} Taylor launches a lengthy polemic against modern subtraction stories, which reflect, in his view, a contentious social imaginary. Taylor believes the relevant notions of secularity and what people "naturally" and "reasonably" believe are not simply "human nature," but are 'the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings . . . and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life'. As James K.A. Smith puts it, "Taylor emphasizes that the [prevailing concept of the] secular is *produced*, not just *distilled*".^{vii}

I see Sacks as trapped in the type of secular-modernist-framed debate Taylor is alluding to. Sacks' searching, essay-length reflections seem to target, and ultimately to dethrone,

a philosophical sensibility he finds in himself, a mindset which he comes to regard as unduly narrow and pessimistic. This sensibility seems to be a form of metaphysical naturalism that is empiricistic, evidentialistic, even positivistic. More, it has a rather imperialistic conception of the value of neuroscience. (One way to restate my earlier objections is to say that Sacks doesn't, once he threatens to evict this brooding naturalist from the throne of his mind, let her fight back, which will leave some readers understandably unsatisfied.)

I am not myself an advocate of strict empiricism, the idea that the empirical sciences are capable, in principle, of explaining everything, nor do I accept a general worldview that treats with near-indefeasible skepticism the belief that people are capable of authentic transcendent experiences. Less friendly critics of Sacks' reasoning will simply dismiss his thinking as suffering from a "romanticism of the gaps" fallacy. I'd prefer my critique to open up our thinking to other, harder-earned, non-empiricist interpretations of experiences perhaps akin to Jimmie's.

It will help, I think, to see an assumption Sacks makes. We often learn about our (discrete or complex) mental skills by recognizing people in whom those skills are, to our surprise, absent or severely diminished. Sacks' reasoning in 'The Lost Mariner' is of this form: if Jimmie "lacks memory,"^{viii} but can experience meaning, he must experience this meaning atemporally. (In Sacks' thinking, Jimmie becomes attuned to Nature or Beauty.) To experience meaning atemporally implies a capacity to do so. From this Sacks seems to surmise that this meaning-experiencing faculty is not a part of the ordinary equipment of Jimmie's mind. As Sacks' put it, this is accomplished by (an aspect of) Jimmie's 'soul'.

One question for Sacks is, of course, how the soul differs from the mind. But never mind that question. Here's another: why suppose that the capacity for a transcendent experience is produced by a single, discrete mental (or soulful) faculty? Most of the rich experiences, whether of meaning or connection, I have rely upon a wide range of mental capacities: my recollections of my time spent with my kids, moral experience, and so on. Sacks' argumentative move to discover a "mind-independent," soulful faculty that taps him into a source of meaning is both false to most experiences of meaning and connection and it invites a particular objection from Sacks' putative opponent, the thinker tempted by the idea that "natural science explains everything." It will be easy enough for her, as it has been for me, to "explain away" what's happening in Jimmie.

Bibliography

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ⁱ For one piece of evidence, see the final sentence of Sacks' essay, the sentence before the postscript.

ⁱⁱ In the film "Memento," this exhaustion plagues the audience. The film is ordered, in terms of scenes, in reverse chronological order. This has the effect of putting the audience in the epistemic position of the main character, Leonard, who suffers from Korsakov's. The audience, like Leonard, never know the precipitating conditions that led them to the present scene. For two hours, the mind has to be "turned on."

ⁱⁱⁱ The documentary "Prisoner of Consciousness" relates the story of Clive Wearing who also suffers a devastating loss of the ability to retain short-term memories. Clive does learn new information, about how to move about in his new flat, for example; but if asked to articulate this information, he can't do it. Similarly, Jimmie shows signs of a form of memory, akin to "muscle memory," that permits him to move about the Home. It would seem, though, if Sacks were to ask Jimmie to articulate this "knowledge," Jimmie wouldn't be able.

^{iv} For instance, Jimmie is not able to identify his nurses; he can't recall having met them or what their names are. But he does seem to reveal some awareness of, for instance, one of his long-standing nurses. He consistently confuses her with a former high school classmate and can't describe their history together, but in developing a certain affection for her, he seems to have a form of inarticulate recognition of her.

^v A fourth objection can be directed at Sacks' choice to construe Jimmie's experience in romanticist terms. Sacks projects – someone might say "imposes" – a romanticist analysis on the case. "How," we might wonder, "does Jimmie himself conceive of his experiences in mass?" If Jimmie is having what he himself would regard as a transcendent experience, would he use Catholic, romanticist, or other language? Would he see himself as experiencing grace, say, instead of Beauty, Nature, or Art? Romanticist language, it seems, is sometimes the preferred choice of the writer who wants to speak in seemingly non-dogmatic ways.

^{vi} Taylor, 22.

^{vii} Smith, 143.

^{viii} That, as I've mentioned, is a problematic claim; and several of the explanations for Jimmie's calm demeanor trade on pointing out that, though Jimmie lacks short-term memories that he is able to articulate, he does have long-term memories and a form of secondary memory.