Indigo: On the death of Oliver Sacks

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My mother had been a painter. She kept glass jars of paint powders under the hot water heater on the back porch. I used to go out there, pull off the metal shield at the base of the heater, and take out the jars to look at the colors. One of them was a deep, rich color I thought was purple. If you tipped the jar one way, the surface became velvety; if you tipped it the other way, it glowed. I have always been disappointed in purples. They were too reddish, too pallid, shallow and flat instead of velvety and glowing. They were never this color, this real color, this *indigo*.

Isaac Newton had identified seven colors in the visual spectrum, rather arbitrarily, Sacks points out, by analogy with the seven notes of the musical scale. One of them was indigo, though it is not clear exactly what color this is or even whether it exists. When Sacks was doing his residency at UCLA, he spent is off-days experimenting with drugs.

> "I had long wanted to see 'true' indigo, and thought that drugs might be a way to do this. So one sunny Saturday in 1964, I developed a pharmacological launchpad consisting of a base of amphetamine (for general arousal), LSD (for hallucinogenic intensity), and a touch of cannabis (for a little added delirium). About twenty minutes after taking this, I faced a white wall and exclaimed, 'I want to see indigo now – *now*!'
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> "And then, as if thrown by a giant paintbrush, there appeared a huge, trembling, pear-shaped blob of the purest indigo. Luminous, numinous, it filled me with rapture: It was the color of heaven, the color, I thought, which Giotto had spent a lifetime trying to get but never achieved." Once, months later, in the lobby during the intermission in a Monteverdi concert that transported him, Sacks saw glints of indigo on ancient Egyptian artifacts but when the concert was over, he went back and the glints were gone. "That was nearly fifty years ago, and I have never seen indigo again" (*Hallucinations* 2012: 109-110).

Nor have I. I am still not sure – nor was he – whether I imagined indigo or indigo really exists. Sacks was good at imagining the imaginary or the unimaginable, not by painting a verbal picture of it but by arousing a sensuous imagination that enters us into the experience of the other, of otherness. To a folklorist, Sacks's world is populated by almost supernatural beings.

I remember the Nijinski elf from his tale of the great bull of the Norwegian mountains. He had hiked, like any folk hero, vigorously, joyously high up into the mountains above the fjørd, rounded a boulder and run into an enormous white bull, whose mild milky face transformed before his eyes into a raging minotaur's. He ran, wildly, heedlessly down the mountain, tripped and fell down a short cliff, and crushed his knee. His leg was paralyzed. He was rescued, taken to the hospital, operated on, his leg put in a cast, and awoke in his hospital room, as he put it, to an amazing apparition.

> A young man – dressed, preposterously, in a white coat, for some reason – came in *dancing*, very lightly and nimbly, and then pranced around the room and stopped before me, flexing and extending each leg to is maximum like a ballet dancer. Suddenly, startlingly, he leapt on top of my bedside table, and gave me a teasing elfin smile. Then he jumped down again, took my hands and wordlessly pressed them against the front of his thighs. There, on each side, I felt a neat scar.
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> "Feel, yes?" he asked. "Me too. Both sides. Skiing… See!" And he made another Nijinski-like leap.
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> Of all the doctors I had ever seen, or was later to see, the image of this young Norwegian surgeon remains most vividly and affectionately in my mind" (*A Leg to Stand On*, 1984: 43-44).

Though Sacks's leg was beautifully reassembled, it remained, mysteriously, paralyzed even after his surgery. He had a perfectly good leg of which he was quite unable to be aware. It had lost its inspiriting presence. He was explaining this to one of his fellow patients, a diabetic who had just had his leg amputated and was suffering from pain in his phantom limb.

> "Isn't it the darndest thing!" the man said. "Doc here's got a leg, but no feeling in the leg – and I've got the feeling, but no leg to go with it!" (1984: 170).

Sacks had a limb without a phantom; his fellow patient a phantom without a limb. He learns to walk again, not by issuing conscious commands to his unconscious leg, which remains unmoved by them, but by inspiriting the leg with music.

> And suddenly – into the silence, the silent twittering of motionless frozen images – came music, glorious music, Mendelssohn, *fortissimo*!... suddenly, without thinking, without intending whatever, I found myself walking, easily-joyfully, *with* the music… and in the very moment that my "motor" music, my kinetic melody, my walking, came back – in this self-same moment *the leg came back* (1984: 144).

It is this disparity Sacks illuminates between the body and the body image that made clear to me that the body's consciousness of itself is not the same as my consciousness of it. I can operate my body on purpose but mostly my body image operates me without me. If I had to run my body myself, I would undoubtedly have the sort of difficulty with it that his patient Christina had when she lost all sensation in her body. She was not paralyzed but she had no proprioception, no awareness of her body. Christina described herself as disembodied, "pithed," a wraith of her former self, as Sacks put it.

> At first "she could hold nothing in her hands, and they 'wandered' – unless she kept an eye on them. When she reached out for something... her hands would miss, or overshoot wildly" (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 1985: 45).
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> Christina had "lost, with her sense of proprioception, the fundamental, organic mooring of identity – at least of that corporeal identity, of 'body-ego', which Freud sees as the basis of self" (1985: 52). Her body, as she put it, had become "blind to itself" (1988: 47) so she had to learn to substitute the visual body image, and to some extent a vestibular and auditory body model, for the felt, tactile-kinaesthetic body she had lost (1988: 49).
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> At first, she could "do nothing without using her eyes; [she] collapsed in a heap the moment she closed them" so she had "to monitor herself by vision, looking carefully at each part of her body as it moved, using an almost painful conscientiousness and care. Her movements, consciously monitored and regulated, were at first clumsy, artificial in the highest degree. But then...her movements started to appear more delicately modulated, more graceful, more natural" (1985: 48).
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> After a year's work, Christina succeeded, as Sacks writes, "in operating, but not in being" (1985: 53). Her "disembodiedness" remains "as severe, and uncanny, as the day she first felt it" (1985: 52).

Christina must now do voluntarily what she once did volitionally. I, by contrast, do things and find my body operated from within without the faintest attention on my part to how I get them done. They are entirely volitional but I am not conscious of what it takes to do them. This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the habit body and Jacques Lacan the phantom body or the imaginary anatomy (Merleau-Ponty 1982: 62; Lacan in Grosz, *The Volatile Body* 1994: 39-40). Sacks shows us that we have a phantom body by showing us what it would be like not to have it.

Sacks imagines us into these alternative bodies with such grace and piquancy that we have found ourselves present to things that have never happened to us but that we have experienced anyway. This was his gift to philosophy, to anthropology, and to humanity.

Oliver Sacks had no imaginary of another reality beyond this one. It was here that he proposed to live, as he put it in the death notice he wrote us, with "audacity, clarity and plain speaking" (*New York Times*, February 19, 2015). One of the things he had the audacity to speak plainly about was that he was afraid of death. I, too, am afraid of death and it is a relief to say that unvarnished. It is, for me, as for anybody, world collapse, as Martin Heidegger put it, the collapse of a world of meaning I have brought about (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 1962: 294). But that very eventuality is also the intensification of the meaning of my world as I live toward my death. Even as he perceived the configuration of his own life "with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts," Sacks was seeing it "as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape." On the verge of dying, he was at once intensely and barely here. Now he is not here at all but the immense trace of his having been here remains with us. We all miss him.