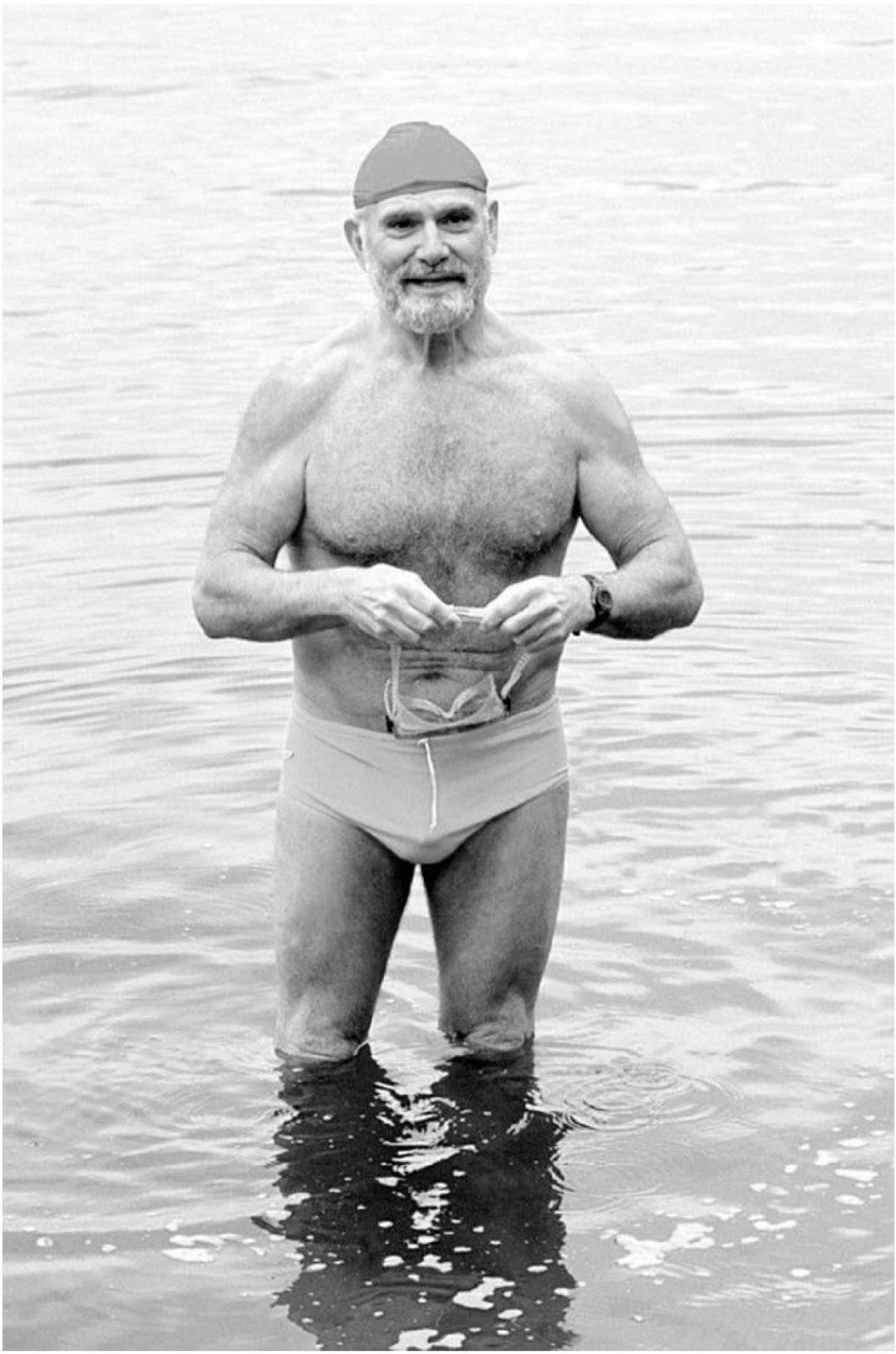

Begin Reading

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In memory

During the four years in the early eighties
that I spent in his often near-continuous company,
Oliver Sacks would sometimes refer to himself
as a clinical ontologist,
by which I came to understand
he meant a doctor whose entire practice
in relation to his patients
revolved around the question,
How *are* you?

Which is to say,
How *do* you *be*?

For, as he had come to understand:
Being is Doing.

Prologue

Heading out to City Island that first time in late June 1981, I'll grant you, I was trawling, vaguely, for another story.

I'd only just transplanted myself to New York City from my original stomping grounds in Los Angeles, largely owing to the success of my previous tale, which a few months earlier I'd somehow managed to sell, pretty much over the transom, to *The New Yorker*.

While still back in California early that spring, only recently turned twenty-nine, I'd come home late one evening to my Santa Monica apartment to find the light blinking on my answering machine. Answering machines must have seemed pretty newfangled in those days, because the feathery voice on the tape began haltingly, "Mr. Weschler, is this Mr. Weschler?... Mrs. Painter, do you think he can hear me? Should I leave a ... Mr. Weschler? This is William Shawn of *The New* ... aaaah, Mrs. Painter, how can I tell if the thing is working?... William Shawn of *The New Yorker* magazine, and I am just calling to say that we all very much admired the piece you submitted to us a few months ago and we were wondering if ... oh dear, Mr. Weschler, if you are getting this message could you please call us back at the following number"—and so forth—"Mrs. Painter, I don't think he got any of that *at all*."

However, I did, I had, and in later years I'd be very grateful for the momentary filter of that answering machine: Had I happened to have been home and picked up the ringing phone, I'm sure I'd have assumed it was one of my friends pulling my leg and blurted, "Yeah, and I'm Bernardo Bertolucci" or something and just hung up.

The piece in question, a book-length midcareer biography of the California Light and Space artist Robert Irwin, had been four years in the making, as I subsequently explained to Mr. Shawn on a visit to New York a few months later, when he invited me to lunch at his usual haunt, a corner banquette at the Algonquin, from which he could survey the entire room while pretty much disappearing, mouselike, into the background. He urged me to sample anything on the plank-long menu the waiter had just extended—nervously I chose the first thing that caught my eye, the day's special, lobster-stuffed filet of sole—at which point Mr. Shawn ordered "the usual" (cornflakes, as it turned out). He then turned the full force of his penetrating curiosity upon me (that of the Iron Mouse, as I'd subsequently hear him called).

"It appears that you currently live in California," he said, "but, I mean, where were you *born*?" (His was hardly an unusual New York prejudice in those days: My Irwin book had by that point garnered more than half a dozen rave rejections from New York publishers, all assuring me that they definitely wanted a look at my *next* manuscript, though they couldn't very well see how they could be expected to succeed in publishing anything about a *California* artist.) "Van Nuys, California," I responded, "in the San Fernando Valley suburbs of Los Angeles." Still confounded, Mr. Shawn bore down: "But, I mean, where did you go to school?" Birmingham High, in Van Nuys. "And college?" Cowell College at the University of California at Santa

Cruz. Things clearly weren't adding up, but Mr. Shawn, a first-rate reporter in his own right, continued probing until he was able to establish that all of my grandparents had been Viennese Jews who'd variously arrived in flight from Hitler (indeed, my maternal grandfather had been the eminent Weimar-era émigré composer Ernst Toch)—a category, at last, that he *could* comprehend.

Following that lunch meeting, Mr. Shawn offered me a job as a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and soon thereafter I moved to New York. The magazine would eventually publish half of my Irwin book across two issues, but as things developed, before that I'd also begun reporting for the magazine from Poland (at the height of its Solidarity passion) and soon afterwards would be submitting a whole variety of one-offs (one on the marvelous Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, for example, and another on the antic nonagenarian musical lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky). But I was still looking for a subject upon whom I could direct the sort of slow, long-term attention I'd previously lavished on Irwin, and in the back of my mind I thought that this at the time still barely known, clearly quite idiosyncratic neurologist, out there on City Island, might just be the one.

★ ★ ★

Nor was I calling entirely out of the blue: He and I had already engaged in a few rounds of correspondence during the preceding year.

I'd first heard of Oliver Sacks during my last year at Santa Cruz, in 1974, the year after his remarkable chronicle *Awakenings* was published. It's worth recalling that Oliver's second book was hardly a bestseller when it first appeared (any more so than his first book, *Migraine*, published a few years earlier and marketed, to the extent it had been at all, to a relatively limited niche market, had been). Although *Awakenings* had been fervently hailed by literary critics (W. H. Auden, Frank Kermode), it had gone largely dismissed in medical circles, and in any case did not really catch fire on either side of the Atlantic. But Maurice Natanson, the lead phenomenologist at Cowell College—a Husserl scholar who looked more like Buber—started touting it almost from the start, which would have been just like him.

Come to think of it, the entire Awakenings drama had been taking place during the very years I'd been studying in Santa Cruz—starting the spring just before my arrival at Cowell, in April 1969, when Oliver, back at the institutional home he was calling Mount Carmel in the book, had become convinced that eighty of the place's five hundred hopelessly lost causes (catatonics, assorted other demented, Parkinsonians, stroke victims, and the like) were not like the others, that even though they seemed to be "human statues" (locked in deep trancelike states from which they had apparently not emerged for years), some achingly attenuated form of life seemed to be persisting there deep inside. On that hunch, he'd resolved to bring them together, segregate them from the rest of the population, and study and care for them as a group. Even before that ward was established, though, Oliver had begun hearing reports of a remarkable new "miracle drug," L-DOPA, which was said to be having surprising results with severely impacted Parkinson's patients. So with some trepidation (for he was suspicious of such claims), he decided to try the drug on his patients. The results that summer were astonishing—a complete springlike Awakening—patients who had neither moved nor spoken in years suddenly emerging joyously active and voluble, and the ward veritably brimming over with blithe energy. The springlike summer did not last, however, and by September (just as I was entering Cowell), the ward at Mount Carmel had descended into the phase Oliver would come to call Tribulation, a bedlam of horrific and screeching side effects and side effects of side effects. Some of the patients never made it through to the other side, though over the years others did, at length achieving a measure of

surcease—Accommodation, as Oliver was to call this extended final phase—nothing ever again as wondrous as their brief summer resurrection nor quite as bad as the prior decades of their deep winter freeze.

I'd taken the better part of a year off during my time at Cowell (tending to my composer grandfather's estate in the wake of the death of my grandmother), so I was still there when Oliver published *Awakenings*, which in turn is how it came to pass that during the last weeks of my senior year, Natanson, glowering, as was his wont (a glower that was at the same time a kind of benediction), thrust the book into my chest as we passed each other in the hall. "Read this," he commanded.

It would still be a few years before I got around to reading *Awakenings*. However, the impact of reading the book when I finally did proved utterly galvanizing, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was quite overwhelmed, albeit a bit puzzled. Because (and it took a while to narrow in on the precise nature of that sense of perplex) for all the drama and fellow feeling evoked by the text, the figure of the doctor himself was remarkably fugitive, held back, subdued. What, I wondered, must all those awakenings and their churning aftermaths have been like for *him*? The more I continued to ponder the question, to hone and focus it, the more I came to sense that the true deep drama of the story had less to do with his decision to administer the drug and all that followed from that but rather with the mystery—what could it have been about him and his professional formation and his own past?—behind the fact that before all that he and he alone had proved to have the (what?) ... the perspicacity to notice those particular living statues as somehow distinct from all the others, and then the moral audacity to imagine that there might in fact be ongoing life persisting deep within those long-extinguished cores.

Being a good little instance of my own specific type in that specific time and place (a free-floating would-be intellectual back in my hometown of Los Angeles in the late 1970s), I responded to those questions in the way we all seemed to be doing in those days: by writing a preliminary screenplay treatment. And that was what I'd first mailed to Oliver in the fall of 1980 (around the time I'd completed my Irwin project and was beginning to shop it around), asking if anyone else had approached him about the idea of turning his book into a film, and, if not (and if upon reading the treatment he found it worthy), whether he might be willing to let me pursue the matter.

There followed several months of silence, but then, early in 1981, in fact on February 13, my twenty-ninth birthday (when he would have been forty-seven), I finally received an envelope containing a letter he'd written some months earlier but somehow misaddressed, which got returned and then mislaid, but eventually, according to the cover note, recovered and was now being sent off once again. "I am most grateful for the kind things you say," the letter began,

> and happy that AWAKENINGS apparently found some deep resonances in you. One always has the fear that one lives/works/writes in a vacuum, and letters like yours are very precious as evidence to the contrary. Indeed, I never regard the writing of anything as "completing" it—the circle of completion must be made by the reader, in the individual responses of his heart and mind—then and only then is the circle of the Graces—of Giving, Receiving, and Returning—complete.

The letter graciously went on to explain how there had indeed been occasional interest in a film version of his book, though nothing definitive and nothing specific at the moment, so he was not averse, but that we should at some point in the months ahead try to get together to discuss things further. Which was fine by me: I was still

mainly busy trying to place that Irwin manuscript (it was a few months out yet from Mr. Shawn's phone call).

Oliver and I continued to correspond sporadically through this period, and though I somehow misplaced those letters during my ensuing move to New York, I remember one in particular in which I suggested that I understood why he'd assigned the institutional home in question the clever pseudonym of Mount Carmel (Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, and so forth), but that it seemed to me that his text was much more kabbalistic (shades of Natanson, again), which is to say Jewish rather than Christian mystical—was I wrong? To which he replied with the first of his mammoth multipage handwritten responses. For indeed, as he went on to explain, the actual place was named Beth Abraham, in the Bronx, his family was deeply Jewish in all directions, in fact his first cousin was the legendary Israeli foreign minister and polymath Abba Eban, the Balfour Declaration had first been broached and stenographically massaged in various London family basements before he was born, and perhaps most important, the great inspiration of his medical life was the Soviet neuropsychologist A. R. Luria, who, who knows, may perhaps have been a descendant of the great sixteenth-century Palestinian Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, one of the principal students and explicators of that ur-kabbalistic text, the Zohar.

After that exchange, our contacts became more and more cordial (even though the initial pretext of a possible screenplay gradually seemed to fall away as I became more consumed with my dawning *New Yorker* responsibilities), until that day in June 1981 when I rented a car and drove out to meet Dr. Oliver Sacks in person in his own relatively new home on City Island.

Later that evening, I recorded my impressions of the visit in the first volume of what would become a veritable shelf of notebooks chronicling our deepening friendship. Here follow some extracts from that first entry:

> Sacks lives today out on City Island, an approximately thirty-minute drive out of Manhattan, through the Bronx, and out onto a small almost quaint fishing island. He has lived there for about nine months, having slowly migrated across a succession of stages, from Greenwich Village, where he lived when he first alighted in the city, on through Mt. Vernon, where he rented an apartment just before this. His house, at 119 Horton Street, is near the end of the island, the terminus of this somehow unexpected urban appendix jutting out into the Sound from the Pelham Bay district of the Bronx. It is a brief walk to the narrow beach at the end of the street, a walk he tells me he takes often. He thinks of himself as only partially terrestrial, or rather, as entirely amphibious.
>
> Indeed, he says, in the old days not too long ago, when he still lived in the Bronx, he used to set out swimming from Orchard Beach over there (pointing north) on the mainland, sometimes circling the Island, for example. And one day not that long ago he came ashore on the pebbly beach at the end of the Horton spur. He ambled up the short street, dripping wet, slogging along. He saw a quaint red house. He thought, What a quaint red house. He saw people moving boxes out of the house. He saw that one of the people was a former student. He ambled up and was beckoned in. "No, no I'm dripping wet." "But no, please, do come in." He acceded. He liked the house, was told that it was on the market, walked back out, said goodbye, walked on up Horton, turned left on the main drag, continued walking on up the road, trailing drops from his sopping trunks, walked into a realtor's office, inquired after the house on Horton St., and somehow bought it on the spot.

The house itself, with its rickety front porch and little back garden—and its eccentric occupant—reminds me of the pictures I've seen of Joseph Cornell's out on Utopia Parkway.

Sacks is a large robust fellow, given to impish childlike outbursts, his chest proportioned like a squat child's, his motions and postures often awkward like a child's, as well.

When we first meet I tell him he does not look like I'd expected. "My physical look changes radically over time," he replies. "Sometimes I'm bearded, sometimes I'm not; sometimes I weigh 190 pounds, sometimes I weigh 300" ("That must be some beard," I hazard). He is currently somewhat closer to the former. He has severe back problems, the result of several accidents, "worldly infelicities"—and when we go to dinner, a brief walk to the nearby fish restaurant, he carries along a narrow square curved lumbar support pillow ("something of a cross between a prosthesis and a transitional object," he jokes). At dinner he suffers recurrent heat flashes, his face reddening and his brow glistening with sweat, and when we return to his home he heaves himself before the air conditioner in his study (there is one in every room) and basks in its shivery flow, relieved at last. He kneels before the thrumming machine, as if in ecstatic prayer (a contented seal).

He tells me he had to get a house for his home—this is his first—in part to house his "secret production." He points to a long shelf parallel to his bed, atop which at least thirty notebooks are neatly arrayed. "At most times I am either talking, listening, or writing: That's from the last six months."

In other rooms, hundreds of casebooks—notebooks devoted to individual patients whose names appear on the spines—are piled one atop the next. In one room, by the study, there is a veritable tilework of audiotape cassettes in their plastic boxes, a wailing wall of contained pain. There are also dozens of videotapes.

He is thinking of writing a book to be entitled "Five Seconds"—a detailed study of the myriad, speeded up lives that a single ticcing Touretter can live through in any random five seconds—he needs to use high speed video equipment in order to even begin to capture it all. He insists every face-change or yelp is significant: and that they all relate, one to the next.

His bookshelves teem with philosophy: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, Heidegger, Husserl ...

He tells me that as a youth he read philosophy uncomprehendingly, but that afterwards he tended to drift away, focusing instead on his scientific studies. His patients, he says, coming to him with their "philosophical emergencies," forced him back to philosophy.

He respects facts, and he has a scientist's passion for precision. But facts, he insists, must be embedded in, entired by stories. And stories—people's stories—are what really have him hooked.

And music. In his later work, he explains, he has come to appreciate the vital qualitative role music can play in the Parkinsonian's or Touretter's life across his recovery:

Music, he insists, is in some profound way healthful.

In his living room, an elegant vintage stereo: The bequest to Sacks of his friend W. H. Auden.

On the irrational and the rational—Sacks has no romantic love of the irrational, nor does he worship the rational. The irrational, he says, can overwhelm a

person—he's seen it happen and he doesn't romanticize the consequences—the irrational needs to be mastered into personality—otherwise it merely fractures and scatters. But at the same time, those who have been visited by these irrational firestorms and surmounted them can somehow become deeper human beings, more profound persons, for the experience.

He points to a postcard reproduction of *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, by Van Eyck. "That," he says, "is the painting's actual size! What a miracle of compression! That is the kind of thing I would have liked to do with that book on five seconds in the life of a Touretter."

He prefers to work in institutions. ("I wouldn't work anywhere else but in the back corners of asylums: that's where all the treasures are.") Such as Beth Abraham, the old chronic-care facility in the Bronx, the Mount Carmel of *Awakenings*. Though he also works for the State & the City. His other principal employers are the Little Sisters of the Poor. His parents and a niece, all doctors, all worked for the Little Sisters in other areas. "I like them," he tells me, "because they are implicitly religious without being explicitly religious."

Thus he has very little income. And it's not as if he couldn't use the money. He points over to a wall (shelves & shelves) of EEG readouts. "There are incredible discoveries in there," he assures me, "if only I had the time, if only I could afford the time."

I ask him why he doesn't take private patients. "Well," he says. "I do. I mean, if someone calls up in need, of course I'll see them. But usually it ends up that I see them here, at the house, and often the first session can take five hours—I mean, it takes that long to begin to know someone—and after you've spent five hours with someone, it's just awkward—how can you ask them for money? It makes me too uncomfortable. And then later I always seem to forget to bill them, anyway."

I ask him if he would accept a grant if one were tendered. "Oh," he squirms, "it would arouse as much guilt as anything. I mean, there are people who *need* the money."

Oliver faced a major crisis in 1972. He was fired from Beth Abraham, lost his apartment, and had his mother die—all in the space of a few weeks. He returned to England, sat shiva for his mother for a full week, and "then a strange calm descended and I was able to complete *Awakenings*."

Six months before that crisis, bounding up some basement stairs, he'd crashed his head on the ceiling and been hospitalized. The final 11 case studies in *Awakenings* derived from the notes his secretary had taken at his sickbed as he recounted the stories of the patients.

"Prokofiev," Oliver tells me, "said he could never read *Oblomov* because he couldn't relate to Oblomov's lack of energy. Well, I seem to alternate between periods of Prokofian energy and Oblomovian sloth."

And there *is* a certain ursine melancholy to the man.

He had been institutionalized himself between ages 6 and 10 during the war, in a very bad institution. The experience cast its dark shadow. He was the youngest of four children, and was, for all intents and purposes, raised as an only child by his two doctor parents, his father a jovial GP, his mother a tremendously accomplished gynecologist and one of the first female surgeons in England.

Three older brothers, two of whom also became doctors, and the other ... The third son, Michael, who'd been with him at the same very bad institution, several years older and indeed on the cusp of puberty, had been destroyed by the experience and is to this day, for all intents and purposes, a schizoid shell

of his former self, living in London with their father.

After attending Oxford and then medical school, Sacks himself left England, seemingly in a hurry though he is conspicuously vague about why, landing in California in 1960, where he completed medical residencies in San Francisco and Los Angeles, engaging all the while (he suggests in passing) in binges of drug-taking, muscle-building, speed-motorcycling and all manner of other extreme behaviors, before finally settling in New York.

As I get set to take my leave, Oliver points to a book of Frank Kermode's on the table that he refers to as *The Genesis of Silence*—"When I first saw this book I sat down and composed a letter to Kermode but I never mailed it. I guess I considered that it might be deemed a bit impertinent sending someone a 30,000-word letter on the basis of the *title* of their book alone! I still haven't read it. I lent my copy, bought six more and somehow managed to lend *them* all. Well, I just got a new copy. Do you want it? Or maybe, on second thought, I should keep it and read it this time."

As he pulls the book away, I notice that he's gotten the title slightly wrong. It's actually *The Genesis of Secrecy*.

All of that, as I say, from the first entry in my notebooks. There would be many more—presently fifteen volumes across four years as, pretty much on the model of my three previous years with Irwin, Oliver and I would get together several times a month, if not a week. Fairly early on I resolved to feature him as a subject for a future profile (Mr. Shawn immediately approved), a profile that grew into a prospective book as the months passed. Oliver was agreeable, if a touch wary. I would travel with him to London, join him on rounds (encountering, among others, the last remaining living Awakenings patients), dive with him into natural history museums and botanical gardens on both continents, join him for meals in New York City, or head out again and again to City Island, where he'd give me free run of his files. I would start recording interviews with colleagues and friends from his youth, and others.

It was an odd period in his life. As I say, he'd already written what would in time (though not yet) come to be seen as his masterpiece. In the meantime, though, he'd fallen into an excruciating siege of writer's block on the book immediately following that, an account of a leg accident of his own and its philosophically and therapeutically fraught aftermath. That terrible blockage (which actually often took the form of graphomania, as he spewed forth millions upon millions of words, just not the right words) would eventually take up almost a decade of his life (our first four years being the final four of that siege). Sometimes, a few days after one of our dinners, I might receive a bulging envelope, featuring a dozen-paged, typed (two-finger pecked), single-spaced amplification on some of the things we'd been discussing. He was tormented by feelings of wastage and uselessness. Indeed, he was at times floridly neurotic on all manner of themes, swinging wildly between feelings of grandiosity and of utter failure. He was pretty much a recluse out there on City Island, still as I say largely unknown, church-mouse poor, entertaining relatively few visitors (and still fewer friends), finding what surcease he could (often, in fairness, quite considerable) in his daily outings to see his patients. He and I kept up our conversations: He seemed to enjoy, by and large, dredging through his past and showing off his wards.

Four years on, his blockage would finally lift and he'd at last complete that damned Leg book of his—with a whole flood of long-dammed-up material clearly just waiting to burst forth in its wake. Indeed, a year after that, in 1985, he would release his breakthrough collection, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, with almost a

dozen other volumes to follow, celebrated bestsellers all over the world, and by the end of the decade *Awakenings* finally would see its translation to the screen, nothing to do with my treatment, alas, with yet more fame and celebration to follow—anyway, just before all of that, I decided to take a retreat of my own, put my notes and transcripts in order (the *index* to my notes ended up taking up more than 250 pages), and finally embark on the writing of my long-gestating profile.

At which point, Oliver asked me not to.

He wouldn't, he assured me, care what I did with all the material after he was dead, but he couldn't live with the prospect of encountering it while still alive. He was wracked with compunctions about one particular aspect of his life, which—well, that's the story, or an important part of it anyway, isn't it? As you will see.

Instead, he hoped that we could remain friends, and indeed we did. I married and he welcomed my bride into his life (and she, somewhat more forbearingly at times, him into ours). She and I had a daughter who became his goddaughter, and the girl grew to adore him (of which more anon, as well). We continued to have splendid adventures together. And then on the far far side of all that, just a few years ago, as he was dying, he not only authorized me to return to that long-suspended project. He positively ordered me to do so: "Now," he said, "*do it!* You *have* to."

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It would necessarily be a different project. Back then I had been imagining something of a midcareer biography and was taking notes toward that. But life intervened, other things started consuming my attention, decades passed, and I stopped chronicling things Sacksian in the way I would have had to if I were going to be launching into a full-scale biography. In any case—have I mentioned?—the man was a graphomaniac. Talk about shelves groaning under the weight of notebooks! Someday someone is going to take on the project of a full-length Oliver Sacks biography, and it's going to be an extraordinary book when it happens, but that person is going to have to be a lot younger than I am now. I wish him or her well—and I envy them.

Instead, what I propose to offer here is at its core something more like a memoir, in particular of those four years in the early eighties when I was serving as a sort of Boswell to his Johnson, a beanpole Sancho to his capacious Quixote.

Even that prospect was complicated quite late in Oliver's life, however, for indeed just before he issued his command that I now return myself to the fray, he'd published his autobiography, *On the Move*, spilling many of the very tales that for so many years had seemed my own exclusive preserve. And yet perhaps not as complicated as all that, for Oliver's late-life telling of his own tale was suffused—and how can one not celebrate this?—with a certain hard-won grace and serenity, whereas the Oliver one encounters in my notebooks from that time almost forty years earlier was a decidedly other creature, far more wildly (and sometimes, dare I say, delightfully) various, and the furthest thing from serene. In addition, my notebooks teemed with the kind of immediate "table talk" so often elided from more conventional biographies and autobiographies. Here was a sublime empathizer entrammeled in his own self-obsessions, a grand soliloquizer who often soared right past his audiences, blind at times to their very faces, an unparalleled clinician who nevertheless at times couldn't help falling back into the role of a studiously detached naturalist, a chronicler who, while he would never consciously shade the truth, was nevertheless not averse to admitting, proudly, that on occasion he'd had to infer or even to imagine it into being.

Nor had these been just any random four years in his life. In retrospect one sees the first half of the eighties as the virtual hinge of his professional and creative

progress, as he seethed and churned to escape the demons of self-involvement veritably blocking any further advancement: By the time they were over, in 1985, this virtual hermit would be on the precipice of worldwide fame, and somehow becalmed and integrated enough (at long last centered rather than merely self-centered) to endure it. (By uncanny coincidence, these were also the years when I myself—albeit at a much less spectacular scale—was consolidating the lineaments of my own professional career, growing from a journeyman California scribe to a regular fixture at *The New Yorker*.)

As I've reacquainted myself with my notebooks during these last few years, and considered how best to organize this book (whether, for example, to reshuffle everything into a sort of conventional biographical order), I came to feel that I ought rather to largely honor the chronology of the entries from those four years, giving the reader a lived sense of how all those often seemingly contradictory details gradually came together for me, offering the reader (and perhaps that future full-scale biographer) a chance to make evolving sense of it for themselves.[1]

The passage of those four years will thus form the meat, as it were, of this volume. Once they have been forded, I will offer a considerably tighter summary of the years thereafter, at least from my point of view, and some wider thematic meditations as well (not least crucially on the sometimes contested question of Oliver's credibility, among other such topics).

But in the meantime, there's this ...

PART I

Getting to Know Him

1

Going for a Row

My next time out to the island, I arrive a bit frustrated because I've just been caught by the local police in an unconscionable speed trap. Oliver sympathizes, takes me out to his driveway, and points to the grille on his car, out of which a little clear plastic spur protrudes.

He tells me how he was always getting tickets for speeding, too, but that one day in Canada he was pulled over and told by the cop himself, "Look, our radar had you clocked at eighty-five."

"Radar?"

"Of course. You should get yourself a Fuzzbuster."

"A Fuzzbuster?"

"Sure. Look, we use electronic surveillance; you have to use countersurveillance. It's only a game."

Oliver pauses, dreamily, before going on. "For a while I had the record for motorcycle speeding tickets in California. I used to belong to a semiprofessional racing club in San Francisco, and one afternoon I came tearing off the northern spur of the Golden Gate Bridge rounding that gentle curve right past a highway patrol car that must have been going about half as fast. Later they said I was going 122, although I think that must have been an exaggeration: I could swear I wasn't going a mile over 115.

"It's not an antinomian tendency," he goes on to clarify. "I just *like* speeding—you know, the sense of movement."

Our conversation shifts to the current state of play with his Leg book.

"Like Gaul," he says, "my Leg book falls naturally into three parts. One: A prologue, Encountering the Bull on the Mountain, fall, and rescue. Two: The ordeal in the hospital in a single room, largely inside my head, provoked to a climax by relentless introspection. Three, and now yet to be composed: A rural Turgenev-like pastoral recovery, making peace, expanding.

"I love Turgenev. My mother used to read me Turgenev.

"My friend the poet Thom Gunn reports that when *his* mother was pregnant, she read him the whole of Gibbon."

Which brings us around to a wider discussion of Thom Gunn and Oliver's doctor colleague Isabelle Rapin and their roles in his life.

"With Thom, as with Isabelle Rapin, I started out imagining them as the sternest people I'd ever met, and now see them as the kindest—stern, that is, but *compassionate*. In both cases, grounded in integrity.

"With both of them the integrity can be felt as sternness or sweetness, depending on which side of the integrity you were on—I mean, over time I had occasion to show them prose occasioning responses of both kinds.

"Thom is relentless on falsehood."

Oliver leaps up to show me a copy of Gunn's new book, a volume of autobiographical essays, inscribed:

> To Oliver, a book of limping prose
> to a man whose prose strides, runs ... leaps!

At which point, as if taking a cue, Oliver suddenly asks me, "Shall we go out for a row? I mean," he continues, "there will be no problem with speeding out there. At best you can only row three miles per hour!"

We head out to the clapboard garage on the side of his little backyard—inside, a series of oars lined along the wall, one of them with its handle shattered clean off. We pick up the oars and oar grips and walk down toward the narrow beach at the nub end of his street. (I roll up my dress slacks, Huck Finn style.)

The boat, a fifteen-footer, is moored upside down in a little sand alcove, the new keylock jammed with sand. "Only a Jewish intellectual," Sacks grumbles, wrestling with the mechanism, "could get himself into such a fix." And yet we two Jewish intellectuals finally manage to free the thing.

And soon we are out on the water (with my notebook curled in my lap at the prow of the boat, I feel like a damsel with her parasol), Oliver pulling with a clean steady rhythm as the boat slices out toward the open channel. Oliver proceeds to row for well over two hours, a continuous steady rhythm, talking cheerfully all the while. A spangle of sweat soon appears on his brow, but not once does the conversation flag for breath—there is no change whatsoever in his breathing, despite the fact that such exercise would quickly exhaust anyone else I know.

Back in California, in his Muscle Beach days, Oliver recalls, he was known as Doctor Squat or Doctor Quads. He had the strongest legs in the state—he has a photo of himself winning the state weight-lifting championship, hoisting *six hundred pounds!* (In the photo he shows me when we get back, he is huge, his large face ballooning with exertion—he is sporting a trim Abraham Lincoln/Amish beard.) "Mine was called a 'dead lift,' and for good reason—it kills. And indeed, in time I damaged a disk in my back. My legs were stronger than my back! My back wasn't weak—it, too, was strong, only strong *and* vulnerable."

We continue on out. The Empire State Building glistens in the distance, on the far horizon to the south—a paperweight souvenir of itself. "My neighbor, whose boat this is," Oliver tells me, "is an old sea captain: Sometimes he rows it to Wall Street, which is about sixteen miles.

"Over there," he continues, indicating over his shoulder, "is the Throgs Neck Bridge. This is my favorite swim: from the island out to the pylons and back, about six miles altogether" (two beats) "although it can get a bit hazardous since the people in their motorboats don't normally expect swimmers in these waters" (two beats) "especially late at night."

A brief pause as he turns around, reconnoitering our drift.

"Swimming runs in the family," he goes on. "My father loves to swim. The poor man's equivalent of crossing the English Channel was a fifteen-mile course off the Isle of Wight—a race for which he has held a succession of records by decile, for swimmers in their twenties, their forties, their sixties, and, currently, for ninety-year-olds."

And your mother? I ask.

"My mother was not so much into swimming." (Two beats.) "She held several English records in the standing long jump."

I can't quite tell if he is kidding regarding this last. "Well, yes," he avers, "obviously a very un-Edwardian thing to do. But my mother was very well

coordinated, you see, not like my father, who like me is clumsy.

"I love to write as I row. Back in 1979," he says, referencing a happier time, as if it were ages ago, "especially on Manitoulin Island in Canada, the rhythm of writing and rowing seemed in perfect unison—I was working on a version of the Leg book—I finally stopped short because my fingers got numb from so much typing, or maybe because I couldn't write about getting better, about returning to the world, about ceasing to be the frantic solitary investigator in the laboratory of myself.

"Rowing allows an investigation of posture and action from the inside. I love performing experiments on and with myself. I also love to write as I swim. Sometimes I have to hurry ashore to scribble what I've thought—and then head out again!

"I'm not a fast swimmer. But steady. And I can swim forever."

★ ★ ★

As we continue to slice through the water, Oliver indicates over his shoulder, to the west. "Beyond the dunghill, that's Co-op City. It's a public housing project that's radically rotten. Architecturally dishonest. It's not organic and it never quite became a community—no wonder."

At one point he notices that he has the metal oar holds on backward and his attempts to resolve the situation turn progressively more slapstick—the oar splashing about, coming unhinged.

"You see how wrongheaded I am," he giggles, "though hopefully on the right side of lethality.

"For its part," he resumes, "City Island was originally a nautical community—its indigenous industry is nautical gear—this boat, all my boats were made on the island. Also living on the island, because of its proximity to Einstein [the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, where he has an occasional affiliation] are a number of doctors—and then also, a number of strange folks. It's a schizophrenic's paradise.

"I've always loved islands. Do you know D. H. Lawrence's story 'The Man Who Loved Islands'? It's about a wealthy man who sequentially isolates himself on more and more barren islands—his stabs at utopias, I suppose—till he dies on a craggy reef. It's another story my mama used to love to read me. She also loved reading me ghost stories."

More on his mother: "As for medicine, I was already a colleague of hers when I was nine."

At approximately age twenty, Oliver ghostwrote with her a book on menopause that did very well.[1] "Far better than anything I've ever done since: over 200,000 copies in print. You might recognize the style. Odd, of course, considering that at the time I had and, notwithstanding my subsequent medical education, *still* have no idea what women have down there. It's a complete scotoma to me." (*Scotoma* being one of his favorite words: not only a pathological hole, as it were, in one's visual field, as in certain forms of migraine, but at times an uncanny gap in one's very awareness that one is experiencing such a hollow.)

From there he drifts into a general chronology of his secondary education: Scholarship to Oxford 1950, Oxford 1951 to 1955. Middlesex Hospital in London from 1955 to 1958. Medical degree in 1958, followed by three six-month house jobs (English internships).

We round one of the pylons beneath the Throgs Neck Bridge, and head back toward City Island, his rowing steady, still not the slightest hint of labored breathing.

"Then in 1959, I launched out on a visit to Canada which I am still on.

"One reason I left England was that I was due to be inducted into the army in

August 1960—one of the last inductees in a draft which was set to end that September.

"I felt a tremendous sense of injustice and yet, arriving in Canada, I decided I would *love* to serve—only on my own terms. So I decided to apply for service as an MD in the Canadian air force. I was taken to Ottawa and interviewed by a senior officer who ended up saying, 'We'd love to have you, only we're not sure—and we *are* sure *you're* not sure—what your motives are.'"

He recommended that Oliver travel for a few months, which he then did. He bought a motorcycle and cruised cross-country, a time he subsequently memorialized in an unpublished long piece titled "Canada: Pause," culminating, in compensation perhaps, with a stint fighting brush fires in British Columbia. After which he surfaced in San Francisco.

"I've always wanted to, and feared to, belong—I suppose it's part of the Jewish thing. I deal with this, for example, at Einstein by belonging to the staff and never being seen. Or else, I would live in a Jewish neighborhood and work for the Little Sisters."

Presently we make landfall back on the little strip of beach at the nub of Horton Street and drag the rowboat ashore. Then walk up the spur of road, stop for a moment at his house to retrieve his prosthetic/transition wedge of a back cushion, and head on up the road, turning right on the main drag toward some restaurants, and establish ourselves in one, where Oliver orders calamari. Which sets him to talking about his days back in secondary school, at St. Paul's Academy in London. He, the antiquarian bookdealer and *Times Literary Supplement* columnist Eric Korn, and the doctor/dramaturg (and Beyond the Fringe veteran) Jonathan Miller were all chums in a legendary biology class in high school. They'd each adopted a favorite grouping: Jonathan—sea worms; Eric—sea cucumbers; and Oliver—cephalopods (including his favorite of those, the cuttlefish).

One day, while summering with Jonathan's parents, Oliver recalls how he and Jonathan were walking past a fish market and heard a monger hawking "Cuttlefish!" at a cheap price. Oliver procured approximately a hundred of them, which the two boys then placed—without preservatives—in a sealed glass jar that they left in the basement of the Millers' home.

"Well, after a few untended weeks," Oliver relates, "of course, the jar exploded with a deep rumbling belch, unleashing what must be the worst smell in the world, that of putrefied cuttlefish. We tried desperately to cover the smell with copious quantities of lavender, so that the room became filled with alternating layers of smell—overripe lavender and rotten cuttlefish—smells that no amount of subsequent cleaning seemed capable of dislodging. We overnight reduced the value of the place, I'm sure, and I don't think Jonathan's parents fancied me around the house quite so much after that."

His earlier passion, he tells me, when he was about ten, had been for chemistry. Returning from a hellish few years at his terrible school outside London, he'd been dazzled at the science museum by his "vision at the periodic table.

"Looking at that table, I saw the logic of the entire world, as if at a moment's glance, and I soon had a lab at home. My parents were generous even though they were in constant danger of being blown up—I was careless, even then, and more than once some sulfur I'd left in the kitchen sink exploded, terrorizing our cook."

Later, however, at St. Paul's, his interest shifted to biology, though that interest was never as intense as had been the initial rush with chemistry. "Perhaps," he surmises, "the relative decline in the level of such passion was connected with sexual disturbance" (he was entering puberty) "or perhaps because I was now forced to deal with others. Everything I'd done earlier, I'd done in secret and by myself. Jonathan

Miller, for instance, first encountered me in a corner of the school library, curled over a book on electrostatics, utterly rapt."

When Oliver arrived at St. Paul's, avid for science, he was at first discouraged by the headmaster and steered onto a more conventional classics track. "But general education stopped when I was thirteen—after that it was pure science."

Well, where then had he gotten all the philosophy?

"Between sixteen and nineteen, as I became less sure of science, I read outside, motivated by a philosophic urgency and need. I went through an enormous amount of useless, hopeless philosophic reading and really none of it helped. Later, at Oxford, where I lived across the street from the library, I read Keynes, the Bloomsbury group, Kierkegaard, but never through the college. In that sense, it was different for me than for Jonathan at Cambridge, where he was a member of the Apostles, a group that engaged in fundamental discussion. And I envied him for that.

"Though, as I say, nothing really held. I was moved by the transparency of Hume, though he didn't give back anything positive. A decade later, in 1966, I experienced an intense Spinoza love that provoked a whole part five to the migraine book as a sort of 'radiant afterspurt,' much like Rilke after *Duino*, which I ended up leaving out, however, because it would have unbalanced the otherwise classical proportions of the book.

"My Leibniz illumination came much later still, in April 1972, a gloomy month when every day seemed filled with sunshine." (This would have been in the midst of the Awakenings drama, well before he'd completed that book. It was also soon after Auden left America: Oliver had accompanied him to the airport that April 15.) "I wandered into a little bookshop on Third and Eighty-Eighth, and in a strange somnambulistically sure way pulled down a volume of Leibniz's correspondence with Arnauld—and my universe blew up. Dewey, you know, had been likewise detonated by Leibniz. I think both of us were attracted by the organic inner activity in Leibnitz. (Thank God I hadn't read Russell on Leibniz before that—it would have killed him for me.)"

He is silent for a moment, stirring the last of the calamari about with his fork. "The thing is, I need a philosophical framework, otherwise my patients would always be blowing my mind. And as I've been composing the Leg book, uniting the clinical with the philosophical, I can't think why I didn't hazard such a framework before—nor why everybody doesn't do it all the time."

We get up and head back toward the house. How's the Leg book going? I ask. His mood turns suddenly dark and gloomy, and he is pretty much silent the rest of the way.

2

Early Childhood, a Harrowing Exile, Cruel Judaism, Homosexuality, and a Mother's Curse

During the ensuing weeks, I got clearance from *The New Yorker*, and permission from Oliver, to begin pursuing a profile, and one of our next meetings took place in the New York Botanical Garden, across (and under) the Bronx River Parkway from Beth Abraham. Oliver began by noting that he comes here three hundred days a year, evincing a love of the botanical that verges on the primordial if not the downright primeval (both in terms of what he loves—ferns, mosses, cycads: the more ancient the better—and in terms of the love itself, which he insisted went back to his earliest days in the backyard garden of his family home).

At one point, I mentioned that I was going to California the next week to deal with the upcoming release of my book on Robert Irwin by the University of California Press, and Oliver in turn suggested I might take advantage of the trip to visit with two of his closest friends from his medical-residency days in California during the early sixties (in San Francisco from September 1960 through July 1962, and then Los Angeles through October 1965): Bob Rodman and Thom Gunn.

Oliver explained how he and Rodman had first met around 1962 at UCLA as residents who shared a vivid common interest, a passion for landscape photography ("California aroused in me a photographer's lyricism"). "And Bob," he assured me, "has detailed memory for periods which I have entirely occluded—I have, or at any rate pretend to have, complete amnesia for the period from 1948 through 1966."

They subsequently shared their writing with each other. And he regards Rodman's daughter as his goddaughter. Rodman's wife died in 1974, during the very time of Oliver's leg calamity. Oliver suggested Bob turn his own anguish into art, which resulted in Bob's book ("a very fine book") *Not Dying*. "There is no doubt that by way of the intensity of shared feelings during those years, we encountered each other at a deeper, stricken level."

As for Gunn, the eminent English transplant poet who I would subsequently be meeting in San Francisco, Oliver explained: "I met Thom through his poetry: his first collection, *Fighting Terms*, and then especially the next one, *The Sense of Movement*, which appealed to me enormously. Indeed, seeking him out was one of the things I'd had in mind when I first headed down to California from Canada.

"Let's see, I arrived in September 1960 and we met some while after that. I saw much of him at the time. I did a lot of traveling on my motorbike, wrote many travel pieces—I was enchanted and verbose, and would show stuff to him. He would criticize some pieces in terms that at the time I found cruel: I approached him raw and vulnerable, as a student or acolyte, and his criticism perhaps made me retreat.

"Still, I'd see him on occasion, at intervals. We were reunited by my publication of *Awakenings*. He sent me a letter that at the time obsessed me: I kept it in my pocket

or wallet for months. I wrote reply after reply, eventually well over two hundred pages, none of which I posted."

What had Gunn said?

"Basically, he wrote that when he'd first encountered me in 1961 he'd thought me the cleverest man he'd ever met and yet he'd found something lacking, and precisely the most important—a sympathy, a humanity—something whose lack made him despair of all the rest. 'I despaired of you,' he wrote, '*and now this*. What happened? What changed?'"

I asked Oliver, What had?

"Well, that would require an autobiography, wouldn't it?" Oliver hesitated, holding back, stammering, wondering, it seemed, how open he should be, should allow himself to be. I assured him that I would let him review anything I submitted prior to publication with regard to any eventual profile. He sighed deeply and went on.

"Well, and um ... what had excited me in Thom Gunn's poetry was its homoerotic lyricism, a romantic perverseness. The perverse transmuted into art. He gave a voice to things which I'd imagined singular and solitary, and this filled me with admiration. The other side of this being that he dealt with elements with which I had never come to terms in myself. And still haven't."

Another long, considered silence.

"At the time—I mean back in the early sixties—I'd been doing a good deal of writing about sex, often satirical portraits, and Thom found some of these (especially one about a mutual friend) cruel and hateful. Perhaps he was right. Indeed, I did a lot of writing about sex between twenty-two and twenty-eight, writing which had a certain power and perverseness. But this all stopped twenty years ago."

Another pause. "The thing is, Thom depicted things with compassion which I depicted hatefully. I mean, there were some things he'd liked: a long lyrical piece on fetishism that he prized.

"Furthermore, both of us were English, but more, we were both Londoners, and still more, we are both specifically from Hampstead Heath—the same hillocks make up our mutual primal landscape. And I hold him very dear."

Ever so tentatively, I tried to ease Oliver back into a conversation about his sexuality. "Closed book," he snapped. "Has been for years. I have not been with anyone for over fifteen years now." There followed a long pause as he hemmed and hawed. "Celibate. Celi ... bate." He loped over to a drooping sunflower, gently lifted its seedpod to his face, and began delicately palpating the pod, his hems and haws morphing into hums and awws.

"By the age of five," he continued at length, conspicuously changing the subject, or so it seemed, "I had become quite fascinated with the sunflowers in my father's backyard. I didn't know the word for it then, but what intrigued me was the way the seeds in the pod tended to organize themselves in variations of prime numbers. Which in turn got me thrumming on the character of the primes themselves. And also burrowing into the notion of pi, which I'd eventually calculate to several hundred places. In my head.

"Funny," he said. "Just the other day I was reading a book on freak calculators—a fascinating book, of course, but I'm afraid I disagree with the whole approach. The author fails to understand the crucial distinction between calculation and numerical contemplation. I was a calculator myself as a child, which is to say I could accomplish mental arithmetic of a high order—I was very good at long sequences of multiplication, at determining roots, and so forth (my father, too, could add long lines of figures at a glance)—but I was also fond of numerical contemplation: the sense of being at play, adrift in a Pythagorean landscape.

"So much of the literature deals with the exhibition of freaky aptitude, with exhibitionism. But there's very little on the numerical temperament. For instance, Zacharias Dase, the number prodigy who was otherwise a dullard, could look at a handful of peas thrown on a table, it was said, and immediately say, '117,' and it's usually imagined that he counted out the peas very quickly—that he 'counted' them 'at a glance.' But the real question Dase raises is 'What is a glance?' Because I'm convinced he saw them immediately as 117 *in* his glance."

Oliver released the sunflower stalk, which now bobbed, presently reverting to its droop.

"Or take the case of the Fin twins, whom I've met on several occasions over the years: The calendrical landscape simply lies before them and they wander through it as you would a park. For a numerically prodigious child, numbers can form a nursery country in which the figures are friends. And in my own case, such numerical contemplation proved the precursor of a similar engagement with the periodic table and then scientific wonder, generally.

"But it is exactly the notion of 'freak show' which should be disbanded. The Fin twins could tell me what day I last saw them on ten years ago. But they are numerical *artists*, not algorithmists. And theirs is an art which is all the more impressive for being of such a low order."[1]

Oliver went on to describe a precipitous fall from the paradise of these early years. At age six, not long after the death of a beloved Hebrew teacher, he and his older brother Michael, upon the onset of the Battle of Britain in June 1940, were hastily bundled off to "that hideous boarding school in the country," as he now characterized it. "The headmaster was an obsessive flagellist, his wife an unholy bitch, and the sixteen-year-old daughter a pathological snitch. The place was called Braefield, though Michael quickly took to calling it Dotheboys, after the Dickensian hellhole in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and does to this day; he committed vast passages of that book to memory and can recite them at the drop of a hat ... We were beaten. I was beaten *every day*. When our parents finally came to visit, I rushed to my mother and clutched fiercely at her knees shrieking, 'Never again! Never again! Never leave me like this again!' But she patted me, assuring me things couldn't be as bad as all that, and soon departed. It was the last strong emotion I ever expressed to her."

What of his parents? What were they doing?

"Well, as a child, I imagined that they were utterly occupied in abandoning me. In fact, they were enormously busy, as I came to understand intellectually years later, though never completely emotionally."

They were both doctors, frantically working through the Battle of Britain.

"My mother was a surgeon, so that she was busy cycling from one scene of devastation to another, operating under appalling conditions. This before the days of antibiotics, when surgical complications were a horror.

"But this separating of the children from their parents—a decision had been made: The Youth of the Empire would be safeguarded at all costs. Anyway, I believe in retrospect this was bad psychologically. It've been better to have faced the bombs with our families."

How did his parents feel about it?

"My father doesn't speak his feelings. Mother did, but only posthumously. She kept a journal during the fall of 1940, which I discovered after her death, in which she repeatedly expressed her distress, but the journal stopped after a few months. She was just too busy.

"We were beaten," Oliver repeated, almost mantra-like, cringing at the memory. "I was beaten *every day*. We were black-and-blue but our parents didn't see it, and for some reason, we didn't complain. Everyone else complained—complained and was

removed. We were the last two there. Finally, they just came and closed the place down."

During the war, his aunt Helena Landau, his mother's sister, had a forest school in Cheshire. "The Jewish Fresh Air School—the JFAS—whereas Jewishness is usually stale air." The school where he and Michael were incarcerated was approximately forty miles out of London, hers another forty. Just as the school where he was kept was an infernal experience, hers represented for him a paradisal haven. Every child, he told me, had his or her own garden. He'd go there on holidays and other leaves from his hellhole.[2]

He had mentioned the uncle who saved him after the war by introducing him to the periodic table. Had he been saved in some sense by this aunt as well?

"Absolutely. She was almost the only good person, the only good reality during those years. She stood for reason, humor, affirmation." He went on to talk at some length about this wonderful maiden aunt, Lennie, as she was universally known throughout the family. ("By age eighty-two, shortly before her death, she would have eighty-seven nieces and nephews and three hundred twenty grandnephews and grandnieces.") She continued to play a major role in his life, standing for one pole of humane decency as against all sorts of other extremities of dereliction. For example, he wanted someday to write a book about homes versus institutions—her school representing an originary home, Braefield a primal institution. Likewise, he said, she stood in, in his mind, for a Judaism steeped in nature.

He paused. "In dying, her last words to me were: 'Don't ignore the minor prophets—Amos, Micah—don't just stick to the big ones like Isaiah.'

"My own parents," he now shifted gears slightly, "though not fanatically Orthodox, lived in a ghetto of their own making. My father to this day is always amazed when a goy turns out to be human."

Oliver cited, for example, their bitter opposition to the marriage at age forty of his brother Marcus in Australia to a *converted* gentile! "They were repelled by a radical uncleanness." Oliver interceded angrily and the marriage occurred (and survived). Just one instance of "an incredible streak of Jewish cruelty which years earlier had fallen on Uncle Benny, my father's brother who I didn't even know existed until my adulthood. He, too, had married a gentile, been hounded out of the family, moved to Portugal. The two brothers, estranged for fifty years! Finally, the woman died and during the years before Benny's death, reconciliation of a sort finally occurred."

This cruel Jewish streak "curiously stopped completely when it came to patients, who were all treated with equal humanity." Both of his parents were involved, for instance, with the chronic-care homes of the Little Sisters of the Poor, as he himself would also be many years later.

He paused for a moment, taking in a bank of ferns. "My mother was sensitive but inhibited," he said. "Lennie used to consider her a dedicated surgeon, overwhelmed into rigorous distance on account of being too sensitive. I don't know."

Their own relationship, his and his mother's, was by Oliver's account way too intense, too close. He was her youngest and a prodigy. She showered him with attention, often deeply affirming but at other times wildly inappropriate. Reading him D. H. Lawrence stories that were decidedly beyond his ken, for example. Or how one of the first buried memories to emerge during his psychoanalysis years later was how she used to bring home monstrosities from surgery—deformed embryos, fetuses in jars—this when he was ten, and then, when he was twelve, how she brought him along to perform the dissection of a child's corpse.

A sudden bracing of resolve now seemed to sweep over him, as if he were only just then remembering my original prodding questions.

"When I was twenty-one and home for a visit from Oxford," he said, "I accompanied my father one evening on his rounds. We were driving in the car and he asked me how things were going. Fine, I told him warily. Did I have any girlfriends? he inquired—now he was the one being wary. No. Why didn't I have any girlfriends? I guessed I didn't like girls ... Silence for a few moments ... Does that mean you like boys? Yes, Father, I replied, I am a homosexual, and please don't tell Mother, not under any circumstances, it would break her heart and she would never understand.

"Not that I'd yet had *any* actual experiences.

"At any rate, the next morning my mother came tearing down the stairs, shrieking at me, hurling Deuteronomical curses, horrible judgmental accusations. This went on for an hour. Then she fell silent. She remained completely silent for three days, after which normalcy returned. And the subject was never mentioned again during her lifetime."

He was silent for a long while, shuffling pebbles in the path about with the toes of his shoes. "At twenty-seven, in 1959, at the end of Oxford and medical school, I ran belatedly away from home, to Canada. Dishonestly so."

How come "dishonestly"?

"I left with no intention of returning and without telling them so. My frequent letters were rich in botanical and geological detail, although empty of the personal. But soon I'd be in San Francisco, and then Los Angeles."

3

Conversations with Bob Rodman and Thom Gunn in California

At the outset of my own July 1982 trip to California, I sat down with Oliver's old UCLA friend F. Robert Rodman, who had in the meantime become a distinguished psychoanalyst and Donald Winnicott biographer, in the garden of his Pacific Palisades home; I didn't tape-record our conversation, so what follows derives entirely from my contemporaneous notes.

★ ★ ★

We met in 1962 when we were both serving out residencies at the UCLA Medical Center, me in psychiatry and him in neurology. He was a great big barrel-chested oddball who was treated as a freak by the other residents, the three other neurologists who were a bunch of obsessive-compulsive conformists. Oliver wouldn't behave, he wouldn't follow rules, he'd eat the leftover food off the patients' trays during rounds, and he drove them nuts.

One time I was there when he presented a case with exquisite precision and care—his capacity for clinical description was so impressive—but they weren't impressed.

He aroused tremendous hostility; on occasion still does.

To me the greatest thing Oliver represents is the compelling need to reunite art and science. And yet this is what galls some people: "Damn it all, he's not being a scientist, he should rid himself of the pleasures of art and language."

His entire passion is to *make whole*, to give himself as an example of wholeness as against fragmentation. But people, and especially his fellow doctors, are addicted to their fragmentations, their specializations; they resent creativity and are rewarded for their obsessive-compulsive avoidances.

Bob Rodman

Much later, just recently, when we went to a coffee shop, at one point he was accused of stealing a soft drink. He was abashed, pitiful: He didn't know what to do. Later he asked me, "Is there something different about me?"

And, of course, there is: He's like a big, free-ranging animal. He strides around with his head up in a perpetual state of wonderment.

He can be stunned by an ice plant: "Wait a minute—it's giving off more light than it is taking in!"

He's constantly raising things to a higher power: That's his gift.

One day, I hesitate to mention this, but, ah well, he drank some blood. He kept staring at it and then, "Oh, the hell with it," he exclaimed, and drank it down, chasing it with milk. There was something about his need to cross taboos.[1]

Back in those days, in the early sixties, he was heavily into drugs, downing whole handfuls of them, especially speed and LSD, not so much marijuana. He was very self-destructive.

At UCLA, he spent a lot of time in the darkroom, developing pictures. He'd go to the roughest bar in town and plop his camera on the counter and start snapping photos, as if he were just looking for trouble.

He was a motorcycle enthusiast in his big lumbering leather jacket, given over to very long rides at very high speeds, would think nothing of cycling up to San Francisco and back in a single day; he once took a young patient with highly advanced MS for whom the drugs were no longer doing a thing out of the hospital, strapped to his back, on a motorcycle ride in the hills, at her request. Which caused another huge scandal.

One time some guy in a car was giving him trouble—car guys are always giving motorcyclists a hard time—and at the next light, Oliver reached in and tweaked the guy's nose!

He used to live out in Topanga Canyon in a very isolated cabin, two or three rooms, a sun porch overlooking a knoll. A piano that he subsequently gave us. He could be wonderfully hospitable up there, offering you lovely things he'd prepared himself, served with the greatest delicacy.

★ ★ ★

He's a person one has the urge to take care of, to shelter. When you are with him, and he's feeling comfortable, he can be so wonderfully expansive, but then when he goes back onto the street, he veritably seems to contract—a terrible sadness seems to overtake him as he returns to his life.

★ ★ ★

One time I visited London with him, had Friday-night dinner with his Orthodox Jewish family, the disturbed brother reciting lengthy prayers in Hebrew. A strange hypocrisy around the mother ("Don't smoke at the table, save it for later on"). At one point the father took me upstairs to see the *OED*—there was clearly a great love of words. Great culture, but extremely neurotic. The passive father, the domineering mother. She was very ambitious and driven; he, a GP, the more practical one, asked me straight out if I needed any money (I felt like a child: well cared for). On the other hand, even before medical school Oliver ghostwrote his mother's gynecological text: I think she saw him very much as a tool and an extension of herself.

When he was twelve years old (has he ever told you about this?), his mother had him dissect a body—a child's body!—something he remained ashamed of and confounded by. I mean, can you imagine such a thing? The crazy-making stamping of a mind at that age. The seduction. The privileged access to a body. The excitement of it, alongside the sense of being putty in someone else's hands, his mother's.

Though he deeply grieved after her death.

Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams* shortly after his father died and Oliver wrote *Awakenings* right after his mother died, and not that long after came the incident in Norway.

★ ★ ★

Norway is of course supercharged for him. The first time he told me of his experience there with the bull, we were sitting right here, and we spoke of a possible "paranoid transference," his fear of his originality being snatched away from him. No more than thirty seconds into that conversation, he went all flush and we had to be off and walking.

And then, walking, he spoke of his fear of being "endunced," as he put it, how some people can "bedunce" you, somebody else can formulate you into a box—this gnawing feeling that he was nothing but a blowhard, which is what many people in fact thought him to be, such that he stayed out of reach (frantically soaring, like an eagle) so as not to be bedunced.

Of course this went side by side with a sense of special privilege, going back to that charged relationship between his mother and himself.

Which I've often thought in turn allows for an interpretation of that Norway experience as a sort of oedipal provocation, with the bull (his father) castrating him (his leg). In which context, to me it seems entirely possible that part of this whole paralysis was psychosomatic (it did all take place the summer right after his mother's death).

Which may in turn help account for why the book has become so loaded for him: the fantasy that his very conception had rendered his father—whose originality he stole—the passive man he is, the benign passive sweet figure. And Oliver lives in fear that his own originality could be taken away again.

★ ★ ★

The first time Oliver was in the paper, his father was far from delighted, in fact mildly annoyed: "The goys will get you!"

His father's fearfulness being most prominent: "Don't stick out, don't be potent."

And yet there Oliver had been as a child, already manifestly potent.

His conflicted partial shame in later years at displaying himself, his occasional disgust at his own dazzle.

★ ★ ★

Dinner with Oliver: At table he begins with great delicacy, progressively dispensing, though, with knives and forks, becoming more and more animal-like, till he's just mauling not only his own plate but yours as well.

★ ★ ★

His letters are masterpieces. That stutter of his—it's in the letters too, the reaching out after the correct expression, the hesitation, stopping and starting over ...

He used to destroy his manuscripts, the work of years, in fits of self-disgust. He writes at a tremendous pace but can destroy in an instant. It's a good thing that now he's learned to deposit copies with others.

★ ★ ★

When I'm talking to him, I sometimes feel that he is not talking to me—he becomes so absorbed in expressing himself that his interlocutor disappears. He can be exquisitely attuned one minute, then utterly self-absorbed the next. Or maybe it's just that he's reverting to the only peers with whom he truly seems to engage in continual conversation—Kierkegaard, Leibniz, Thomas Browne ...

On the other hand, when he is with patients, he attends to *them* perfectly. It's as if the patients rescue him from his narcissism, drawing him back into the world, delivering him every bit as much as he is delivering them.

But only with the sorts of patients he finds in institutions: He belongs to and with the Community of the Refused.

★ ★ ★

He is subject to migrainous attacks, during which he becomes physically overwhelmed. He is conscious of his physiology in a way that few are. That way, for example, he will suddenly bound up and simply *have* to be out walking ...

And yet there is an overarching benignity to him: a larger-than-life person organizing himself toward a delicate gesture, a goodbye kiss on the cheek of my little daughter.

★ ★ ★

A strange consciousness and awareness in him of his own oddity, which I think has been in him since his childhood—being a genius like that since childhood must have rendered him very lonely—and yet, in spite of the pressures and the ridicule, he has developed autonomously (he sees himself as integrated, and he may be right, he being the integrated one and the rest of us the oddballs).

Sure, he's stunted and yet in another sense he has this incredible autonomy, *like a gigantic bonsai tree*, an awesome survivor.

★ ★ ★

He really came to my rescue when my wife was dying back in 1974. He was the one whose interventions meant the most—the immense breadth of his ego, its sheer capacity to wrestle with the tragedies of life, made him an ideal interlocutor. He wrote some letters that I published in my own eventual book on those months simply as a demonstration of how it is possible for one person to help another.[2]

★ ★ ★

July 3, 1982 [handwritten, Sacks to Weschler]

> Dear Ren,
>
> I am glad you had a good meeting with Bob Rodman—and I am glad you will be seeing Thom Gunn. That leaves only my friends on the East Coast—and above all in England!
>
> I am sorry I got neurotic on the phone at the Botanical Garden the other day, but (especially being a portraitist myself) I find it a bit scary to find myself the subject of a (potential) portrait—and fear disclosures of all sorts. But equally, indeed far more strongly, I know that I can trust your discretion and dignity no less than your exceptional gifts and penetration—and I suspect too that the darker sides of myself may not be too relevant to what I sometimes am —at best. Or, at most, through a mysterious alchemy and sublimation.

★ ★ ★

After meeting with Rodman, I traveled to San Francisco, where I saw Thom Gunn, the British poet whose journey west had presaged and in some senses occasioned Oliver's own.

Born in 1929 (four years before Oliver), in Kent, England, Gunn graduated from Trinity College, Oxford, in 1953 (two years before Oliver received his undergraduate degree, also from Oxford, though from a different college and they do not appear to have met there). The following year Gunn published his first book, Fighting Terms, *and shortly thereafter he left for America, initially to study with Yvor Winters at Stanford, after which he settled permanently in San Francisco, where his next book,* The Sense of Movement, *followed in 1957. One of the truly eminent poets of the English language during the latter half of the twentieth century, he wrote verse that blended his English roots (especially formally: for the first decade of his career he restricted himself to iambic pentameter, striving as he quipped at the time, to be "the John Donne of the Twentieth Century") and the light of his transplanted California home (in terms of subject matter, especially, mirroring the likes of Gary Snyder and Robert Duncan in the way he celebrated popular culture and the vagaries of daily life). In later years, he would produce one of the great acts of witness to the AIDS epidemic,* The Man with Night Sweats *(1992), but that horror still lay in the future, or rather was only just beginning to make itself enigmatically felt, when we met at a little Italian espresso place in the Castro, on July 3, 1982. What follows is a condensed and edited version of the tape of our conversation.*

How'd you first meet Oliver?

I met Oliver here in San Francisco in it must have been 1961, shortly after he'd arrived in California as a medical intern. He rode a motorcycle and called himself "Wolf," which is apparently his middle name. One time he kiddingly said, "What would my maternal grandfather think if he knew the way I am using his name?" It sounded nicely ferocious. And he wrote a great deal. He wanted from very early on to be a writer, and he kept extensive notebooks. *Extensive.* I remember at one point there being something like a thousand typed pages of journal. One summer he

decided to chronicle the trucking life, had gotten on his motorcycle, which broke down, and ended up hitching with truckers and coming back with a long account of what it was like to be a trucker.[3]

Thom Gunn

Another time he took his motorcycle down to Baja, Mexico, very remote, I'm not sure where he even got his gasoline, but he told me about it when he came back, how he'd slept in his sleeping bag by the side of the road. I said it must have been wonderful, and he said, yeah, except for all those vultures circling overhead. And I said, yeah, but everyone knows that vultures don't attack a living person, to which he replied, "Yes, but it kept crossing my mind that there might be the odd schizophrenic vulture that didn't know that."

I don't know what happened to that journal, at one point I had the whole thing, I wish I could show it to you right now, it may well have gotten inadvertently thrown out a while back when I moved, I know I haven't seen it since I've been living in this house, which has been ten years.

What was he like, especially on just arriving?

Well, this is something I really wanted to tell you about, because he has gone through the most extraordinary changes of anybody I've ever known. I wasn't present for the change, but I witnessed both the before and after. Going back to the journal, for example, there was one bit that became quite notorious among his acquaintances, because he wrote a scathingly satirical piece about a sadistic eye doctor, a guy who in the meantime unfortunately has gone mad, but at the time he

was sane, or as sane as he was ever going to be, though slightly odd. I mean, he wasn't a sadistic doctor; he was sexually sadistic. So Oliver wrote this satirical piece on him, referring to him as Doctor Kindly, and the piece *was* quite funny. But it was very unsympathetic toward someone whom Oliver basically liked personally. And then he went and showed the piece to the guy. And the guy didn't like it at all, was actually quite hurt, as who wouldn't be, nobody would like being made fun of in such a way. And Oliver was quite taken aback by the reaction.

My criticism of him at the time, and I don't know how overt it was but it was there, was that the piece was well written, wonderfully observant, obviously good training for some kind of writing career, *but* ... It was as if he was the only person there, everybody else was being judged so harshly, so contemptuously, and so sarcastically. He seemed to have a great inability to put himself inside the skin of others, or even to be able to imagine how they might react to him. Not that he did this so much in person, it was entirely literary. I mean, obviously it had something to do with what he felt about people, but it was not at all what he really felt about people: He was a much nicer man than he appeared, than he presented himself as being in his writing. He was much more transparently self-dramatizing in those days. I mean, there is of course still a sense of drama about him, though you don't feel it is in any sense posturing. It was never unpleasant posturing at all, he was always nice, but in his youthful enthusiasms he was always trying on poses.

Then he went down to Southern California, and I saw less of him. I didn't start seeing him frequently again until after he'd moved to New York, by which time he was an entirely different man.

This would have been before he wrote Awakenings*?*
Oh yes, but he was obviously the man who would be able to write *Awakenings*. The first Oliver I knew would have been the last person I would have thought capable of writing *Awakenings*. It was precisely his problem that he couldn't sympathize with people enough. It wasn't that he was lacking in kindness; rather he was lacking in sympathetic imagination. And that is of course what he has now—in his conduct and his talk and his life and his writing—more than anyone else I know.

Now, what happened in between, I don't know. I'm sure it was a great complex of things. There was obviously a maturing. When he arrived in California, he still had no sense of who he was or what he wanted to be—as I suppose none of us do when we are young and everything is changing. And he was unhappy. Maybe it's just that whatever we mean by maturing, the sort of thing most people go through in their early twenties, he still hadn't gone through any of that.

Perhaps it had to do with his having been something of a prodigy, the way that a child who is already the intellectual equal of adults at, say, age five is likely nonetheless to lack the emotional maturity to go along with it, and indeed may still have the emotional maturity of a five-year-old well into his adulthood.
I think that could be right, and that other maturity didn't really come till his late twenties or early thirties, though when it did, finally, it was a much deeper and more meaningful and more thorough-going maturity than maybe any I've ever seen.

As to how it could possibly have arisen, I know it's unfashionable and dated to say this kind of thing, but I think Oliver might support me in saying this: I think it may have had something to do with his taking a lot of acid, at a time when we were all taking a lot of acid. We didn't exactly coincide in this, he'd already left San Francisco by the time I myself started, but he did do a lot of chemical experimentation, I mean, outrageously extreme, far more than anyone else I knew.

His old slogan: "Every dose an overdose."

Right! Precisely. And I think that may have had something to do with it. I mean, there are a lot of outrageous claims made about acid. Nevertheless, I find that it helped me get insight into myself and my life and other people that I might not have attained otherwise.

But going back to the before version of Oliver, when his brilliance was coupled to a certain—what shall we call it?—shallowness.
A bit, yes, maybe, but any word I could use makes it sound more vicious than I intend. Self-centered? Perhaps, but it wasn't so much self-centered as there was an inability to get beyond the self. There was that cleverness at the expense of others, an inability to recognize how he might be hurting others, as with Doctor Kindly. The sort of thing we all go through perhaps in our teens, being smartasses as a way of proving ourselves, defining ourselves by scoring off others, but here he was approaching thirty. He was never very nasty, if anything I was sometimes nasty to him. He was always generous, but there was this other ... Actually, I often found him a bit irritating in those days, and embarrassing because he was so enthusiastic about me, and I just didn't feel there was much to be enthusiastic about. He seemed to be finding things in me which I honestly didn't think were there.

What kinds of things?
Wisdom and stuff. I don't know. The motorcycles in my poetry. I know Jonathan Miller first got him to read me.

One thing he has said about you is that in your poetry you were so much more at ease with issues that were still causing him grief, the homoeroticism in particular being what I suspect he is referring to.
Well, he did seem to be just beginning to come to terms with that, fitful terms perhaps. I'm sure he wouldn't mind my telling you how he seemed to fall for a series of what struck me as rather silly little boys, who were immensely attracted to his motorcycles. A series? Maybe it was only two or three, but it did seem endless, and they were all very butch, and very nice-looking, and very young, and very rough. They seemed to be off the streets, and obviously he was a great big burly father figure to them, and a wonderfully romantic figure.

What with the motorcycles and all, did you have the sense that he was living dangerously?
I think he is a dangerous rider, yes, or a reckless driver, let's put it that way.

And also dangerous in terms of the people he hung out with?
I don't know that they were dangerous. I mean, I don't think they had knives. As I say, they tended to be more like little street boys. But no, he hung out more in leather bars, as I did, and they're not dangerous. He was a boisterous presence, and I suspect he probably charmed half the people and annoyed the other half.

I could easily imagine him getting into trouble with those he annoyed.
Well, yes, no. I mean, he might have gotten beaten up, though remember he was very strong, still there was an obliviousness to danger with him. On the other hand, you're really no more likely to get yourself beat up in a leather bar than anywhere else, it's all just for show.

And then, of course, he got to know Mel, I guess you know about Mel ...

Not that much.
Well, Mel was the ... a wonderful boy. He was probably about the same age as the others, physically he looked like them, but he was—is—a person of great sensitivity

and intelligence, and they did live together in Southern California. I found him rather attractive myself. I didn't get to know him that well, since they were down there, the last time Oliver visited here was with him—that was many years ago. Mel seemed to me, without oversentimentalizing things, to be *the* great love, and a worthy love he was, too. I don't know what difficulties there were, or I suppose there must have been, since he never moved to New York with Oliver. They are still friends, I believe, and they obviously feel a great deal for each other. He struck me as very fine, on the few occasions I met him, I liked him a lot. Today he lives somewhere up north, Oregon or something. I don't know whether Oliver has had any love relationships since then. My sense is he hasn't.

Did you have a sense of his living a very split life in those days, with his medical work to one side and the rest to the other?
No, I didn't see it as split, on the contrary it seemed wonderfully integrated. All of the enthusiasms would spill over into each other. Part of the richness of his mind comes from the fact that there are all these interests, and all this knowledge of different sorts, and none of it is categorized. He's not like the professor of eighteenth-century literature who hasn't read any of seventeenth- or nineteenth-century literature since having taken his PhD. He's more like Ezra Pound or somebody like that.

Indeed, he strikes me as coming from the period before the sciences and the humanities split apart. Leibniz and Browne and people like that seem his contemporaries.
Just the other day he was quoting William Harvey on the musicality of movement.[4]

Yes, it's as if they were all his contemporaries and he was merely adding his observations to theirs, almost as if he were expecting them to reply, and sometimes even hearing their replies.
Pretty early on, I think before the migraine book or else immediately afterwards, he said to me how he longed to write a book that would be good science and good literature. Maybe not exactly those words, but something close. And then he went and did just that.

Though of course this capacity of his is still all tied up with the most remarkable sense and pressure of compulsion. I mean, I recognize a certain compulsiveness in myself, the sense sometimes that I just have to do things, or that I can't write, or whatever—but nothing like him. My blocks are never so lengthy or so absolute. On the other hand, when I do then write, I could never write the way he does either, you know, through days and nights, nonstop, thousands of words all perfectly ordered in just a few weeks. *Migraine* in nine days, that kind of thing: the ability to tap into demons like that. The epic blockages, on the other hand, seem in some way allied to his feeling of sympathy with the patients in *Awakenings*, who are more completely blocked than anyone else one can imagine. When he describes how they are running and their steps are getting so much smaller and smaller until, ultimately, they are just running internally—one sees this imaginative sympathy, perhaps also coming in some way from his brother, who I sometimes think he conceives of almost as an alternative self.

Indeed, what about his brother?
Well, as you may know, he is, I don't know the word, maybe schizophrenic or something. Oliver once apparently overheard him say, "I went mad so the rest of you could stay sane." Most extraordinary remark. I'm not sure what one makes of that, though I am sure he means a lot to Oliver, over and beyond his just being a relative.

[A long silence, and then, as if to leaven the gravity of that last remark, Gunn breaks into a


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