



## The secret lives of things: a phenomenological approach to Oliver Sacks' narrative of the life course

Las vidas secretas de las cosas: una aproximación fenomenológica a la narrativa vital de Oliver Sacks

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**ABSTRACT:** Framed within the phenomenological turn that literary studies have experienced through the last few decades, this article analyses Oliver Sacks' narrative of the life course in *Uncle Tungsten* (2001) and *Gratitude* (2015) as about the very act of embodied perception from an object-oriented perspective. Sacks presents himself as what French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty depicted as a «phenomenal body», a sentient body playing an active and intentional role – in the phenomenological sense of being directed toward something – in his/her relation to and perception of the self, nature, and the other. This study reads Sacks' narrative as an outstanding literary illustration of Gilbert G. Germain's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception as a return journey to a world permeated by an affective, lyrical, and enigmatic understanding of science where the embodied perception of natural objects is central to the recognition of the self and what surrounds it.

**Key words:** Oliver Sacks, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, objects, life course, *Gratitude*, *Uncle Tungsten*.

**RESUMEN:** Enmarcado en el giro fenomenológico que han experimentado los estudios literarios en las últimas décadas, este artículo analiza la narrativa vital de Oliver Sacks en *Uncle Tungsten* (2001) y *Gratitude* (2015) como textos que representan el acto de la percepción corporal desde el punto de vista de la relación del ser con los objetos. Sacks se muestra en estas obras autobiográficas como lo que Maurice Merleau-Ponty describió como

el cuerpo fenomenológico, un cuerpo dotado de sentidos con una función activa e intencional –en el sentido fenomenológico de la acción orientada hacia algo– con respecto a la percepción de sí mismo, la naturaleza y el otro. Este artículo presenta la narrativa de Sacks como un brillante ejemplo literario de la concepción que Gilbert G. Germain tiene de la fenomenología de la percepción de Merleau-Ponty como el regreso a un mundo permeado por una visión afectiva, lírica y enigmática de la ciencia en la que la percepción corporal de los objetos de la naturaleza es esencial para el reconocimiento de uno mismo y del entorno.

*Palabras clave:* Oliver Sacks, Merleau-Ponty, fenomenología, objetos, vida, *Gratitude*, *Uncle Tungsten*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

British neurologist Oliver Sacks (1933–2015) is mostly remembered and acclaimed for his innovative medical treatments and writings such as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), his best-selling book *Awakenings* (1973), and the successful 1990 film adaptation starring Robert de Niro. He is greatly appreciated for his work as a doctor who carried out, as Anatole Broyard rightly puts it, «a cognitive, physical and affective recognition of his patients as he constantly turned what seemed physical or mental disadvantages to advantages» (1990: 1). Drawing on Russian neuropsychologist A. R. Luria's terminology,<sup>1</sup> Sacks practised what he called a «romantic» (1998: 5) neurology or a «neurology of identity» (1998: viii) mingling medicine and humanity, body and soul, devoting his life to his patients, whose personal experiences he carefully listened to and then narrated in an enchanting and engaging prose that shows how that humanity seeps through disability.<sup>2</sup>

The neurologist has been described as «a virtuoso of medical innovation», «a poet laureate of contemporary medicine» (Broyard, 1990: 1), «the Shakespeare of science writing» (Grant, 2019: par. 8), «a Copernicus of the mind», «a Dante of medicine», and «the greatest teacher in the art of living» (Popova, 2015: par. 1). Among these various definitions, which show the genius of the man from a scientific and humanistic side, Philippe Chevallier's 2012 description of Sacks as «le Merleau-Ponty britannique» serves as the starting point of this article. It analyses Sacks' narrative of the life course as about the very act of embodied perception from an object-oriented perspective as the author presents himself as what French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty depicted as a «phenomenal body», a sentient body playing an active and intentional role –in the phenomenological sense of being directed toward something– in his relation to and perception of the self, nature, and the other.

Sacks narrative of the life course is read in view of Gilbert G. Germain's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception as a rupture with what he

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between Luria and Sacks see C. Schwartz (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Sacks' clinical writings from an ethical perspective see Couser (2004).

calls a disenchanted world controlled by a purposive rationality and a technological and scientific tyranny that results in a disconnect between humans and nature and in a world devoid of mystery. Sacks' narrative is here envisioned as an outstanding literary illustration of a return to a world permeated by an affective, lyrical, and enigmatic understanding of science where the embodied perception of natural objects is central to the recognition of the self and what surrounds it.

This article is framed within the phenomenological turn that literary studies have experienced over the last few decades.<sup>3</sup> In the *Phenomenology of Love and Reading*, Cassandra Falke surveys what she calls «a long, sometimes secret historical relationship» (2017: 19) between phenomenology and literature. The act of reading literature, she affirms, «lends itself readily to phenomenological reflection» (18). Drawing on Husserl's, Heidegger's, and Jean-Luc Marion's reflections on the connection between art and phenomenology, Falke identifies both literature and phenomenology as able to increase «our awareness of the actions our minds perform in relation to the world because both the phenomenologist and the artist see how inseparable mind and world are» (19).

Falke points to Rita Felski as «the head» (2017: 29) of what the latter herself defines as a «new phenomenological turn» (2008: 18) in literary and cultural criticism. Felski calls for a replacement of an exclusively analytical and detached literary criticism, or even a phenomenological formalist model,<sup>4</sup> for one «more receptive to thick descriptions of experiential states» (2008: 10–19). She argues for an «impure or hybrid» (2008: 17) phenomenological approach that perceives literary texts as the crystallisation of «what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential interwovenness of our being in the world» (Felski, 2008: 104) and that conceives both cognition and affection as essential components of literary analysis. Felski locates the realm of things at the centre of this phenomenological literary enterprise. Phenomenological intentionality of consciousness, that is, the directedness, the turning, or the orientation of the self towards things around him/her is implied in the critic's understanding of how the literary text produces knowledge:

Phenomenology is often perceived as a philosophy of things, as a patient and purposeful turning toward the object. What might literary texts teach us about the social resonance of stuff? How do works of art reorient us toward the material world? ... Though words indisputably link up to other words, critics now concede, they may also speak of the secret lives of things, reveal something of the mute matter to which they gesture.

(Felski, 2008: 98)

In her illuminating phenomenological analysis of the concept of orientation, greatly indebted to Merleau-Ponty's reflections that «the word perception indicates a *direction*» (1962: 12) and that «the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world» (1962: 408), Sara Ahmed states that «if consciousness is about how we perceive the world “around” us, then consciousness is also embodied, sensitive, and situated» (2006: 27). Considering this embodied form of phenomenology, this paper engages with previous studies which have analysed the

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<sup>3</sup> On the phenomenological turn of literary studies see also Baena (2021), Chretien (2019), Mildenberg (2019), Natanson (1998), and Sepp & Embree (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Felski is referring here to Husserl, the Geneva school and the reader-response theory critics.

influence of Merleau-Ponty on Oliver Sacks by exploring his works from a neurophenomenologist perspective. «Maurice Merleau-Ponty n'est pas mort, il vit à New York, il est neurologue» (par. 1), said Philippe Chevallier in 2012 when pointing out the connections between the publication in the United States in 1964 of the French philosopher's last paper «Eye and Mind» («Oeil et l'esprit», 1961) and the release of Oliver Sacks' *The Mind's Eye* in 2012. Chevallier saw in Sacks' work an astonishing echo of Merleau-Ponty's previous thought about the intersection between vision, mental constructions, and our engagement with the world outside. Before Chevallier, Sacks' writings about his patients' clinical cases, even his own in *A Leg to Stand On*, had been already analysed from a phenomenological perspective by critics such as Lisa Diedrich (2001), Kathryn A. Jacobi (2011), and Sergio Gomes da Silva (2011).<sup>5</sup> Diedrich observed how Sacks' clinical reflections on bodily dissociation, and its effects on self-perception, were connected to Merleau-Ponty's objective or sensible body –as opposed to the phenomenal or sentient body– and to his discussion of agnosia and phantom limb syndrome in *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*, 1945). Diedrich defined Sacks as a phenomenologist in his attempt to narrate his «own experience of bodily breakdown and being disabled in the world» (2001: 212) in *A Leg to Stand On*, which the critic describes as «a neurological and phenomenological story» (213) in which the body is the object of attention. Jacobi also applied Merleau-Ponty's theories of bodily perception to analyse *A Leg to Stand On* and showed that «the self-objectification that occurs in his narrative is a testament to the nature of disembodiment as an almost necessary phenomenon for living through severe physical trauma» (vi). The same year and drawing on Chilean neuroscientist and philosopher Francisco Javier Varela's pioneering coinage and development of the term «neurophenomenology», Da Silva explored how Sacks' descriptions of his patients' neurological disorders are in line with the dialogue established between cognitive science and the phenomenology of perception. By examining some of the cases in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Da Silva illustrated that the neurologist observed an intimate connection between the construction of the body image and identity.

Despite the connections that the approach of this article presents with these analyses of Oliver Sacks' writings from a phenomenological perspective, it departs from them for three main reasons: a) it does not centre on Sacks' medical cases or his patients and, therefore, does not focus on medical narratives but on Sacks' narrative of the life course; b) it studies how in Sacks' works intentionality is not merely directed towards the body itself but towards objects which are basic constituents of nature, like metals and the periodic table; c) taking as its focal point Merleau-Ponty's assertions that «[o]ur perception ends in objects», which appear «as the reason for all the experiences» (1962: 67), and that «an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or become the imago of a whole segment of life» (1962: 52), it puts emphasis on Felski's reflections on the way literary texts can «reorient us towards the material world» by exploring the ways Oliver Sacks' boyhood memoir *Uncle Tungsten* (2001) and end-of-life autobiography *Gratitude* (2015) show that the process of recognition of oneself and the world around over the life course is largely founded on how one delves into –borrowing Felski's terms– the «secret lives of things» (2008: 98).

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<sup>5</sup> See also Varela, Thompson & Rosch (2016) and Gordon (2013).

## 2. OLIVER SACKS AND THE DISCOURSE OF DISENCHANTMENT

In «Life Continues», one of the essays in *Everything in Its Place* (2019), Sacks, diagnosed with cancer and knowing that his death is growing near, expresses his «deep fears» not about his own extinction but «about the well-being and even survival of our world» (256). He depicts the world he has inhabited as being threatened by the dictatorship of technology, which isolates human beings and is, therefore, threatening to annihilate human capacity for concentration, observation, original thought, creativity, and attachment, leading to what he calls a «neurological catastrophe on a gigantic scale» (258). This runs parallel to a human-induced disaster: the lack of respect and affection for the natural world that surrounds us. In Sacks' «Why We Need Gardens», also in the same volume, we read: «Clearly, nature calls to something very deep in us. Biophilia, the love of nature and living things, is an essential part of the human condition» (2019: 246). In nature we find ourselves «simultaneously calmed and reinvigorated, engaged in mind, refreshed in body and spirit» (243). The effects of nature, says Sacks, «are not only spiritual and emotional but physical and neurological. I have no doubt that they reflect deep changes in the brain's physiology, and perhaps even its structure» (246).

Sacks' masterly prose, which could be defined as a treaty on the very act of perception, reveals how human connection and orientation is mostly achieved through the incarnate alignment with a nature that must be nourished and cared for and that constitutes an essential part of the vital experience of human beings who, in order to survive, must be aware of their own inextricable environmental condition. The author's presentation of a necessary human engagement with nature has strong points of connection with Gilbert G. Germain's argument in his book *A Discourse of Disenchantment: Reflections on Politics and Technology* (1993). In the human-nature relationship, Germain opposes what he calls an «outward journey» and a «return journey». The former finds its origin in a Cartesian dualism between a self removed from a phenomenal world and the other, and it is based on Max Weber's depiction of the «purposive character of modern rationality» (Germain, 1993: 2). In this «outward journey», control is taken by a calculating and technical reason focused on the imperatives of technology, the necessary means to achieve particular ends, and an impulse to dominate, objectify, manipulate, that is, disenchant nature, by depriving it of its magical qualities or spirit. A disenchanted world, therefore, authorises the domination of nature by human beings. This results, in turn, in the disorientation and despiritualisation of the subject that absorbs nature. Germain's theory connects with the process of decadence already denounced by French metaphysician René Guénon (1886-1951) in works such as *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (*Le Règne de la Quantité et les Signes des Temps*, 1945) in which he criticised a modern world ruled by a profane science which prioritised substance and quantity as opposed to traditional sciences which were based on essence and quality. The application of this profane science resulted in a mechanization of humans and a materialistic modification of the environment that Germain also decries in his work. A «return journey» is then necessary, Germain argues, to imbricate humans and the natural world and to «undercut the “tyranny” of modern rationality» (1993: 3). Germain regards Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception as a direct challenge to disenchantment. It implies, in his opinion, a return journey to the world around, to its objects, to nature, that prioritises bodily connection over instrumental rationality since, as Merleau-Ponty states, «[t]o perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body» (1964: 42).

Four concepts are central in Merleau-Ponty's return journey: perspective, enigma, chiasma, and flesh. These are also key aspects to Oliver Sacks' narrative's rendering of the bodily approach to nature. The spatiotemporal coordinates make our corporal perceptions of the objects a perspectival phenomenon. Our perceiving body is situated in a determinate space and time and the object we sense is also placed in a particular context or horizon (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 67–72). This necessarily turns perspective into something inherent to the embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty states that due to the perspectival condition of perception «the perceived possesses in itself a hidden and inexhaustible richness, that is a “thing”» (1963: 186). The phenomenology of perception implies, therefore, a multiplicity of perspectives which accounts for the enigmatic character of things, the mystery of nature and the impossibility of wholly apprehending them from just one viewpoint. To Merleau-Ponty, «[t]he world and reason are not problematic. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them» (1962: xx). Germain highlights that Merleau-Ponty considers that «the objective of contemporary thought is to recover the mystery of the experiential world which has been neglected in an age given over to the domination of nature through technical means» (1993: 112–113).

The French philosopher's phenomenological concept of «flesh» is essential to understand the chiasmatic symbiosis or intertwining between body and nature that takes place in this experiential world. «Flesh» refers to the overlapping of both body and world, as the body that perceives through its «inter-acting senses» (1962: 225) is at the same time an object that is perceived. He conceives of «two ‘sides’ of our body, the body as sensible and the body as sentient» (1968: 136), equivalents to the objective and the phenomenal body.<sup>6</sup> Body and world then do not have a hierarchical relationship controlled by the perceiving body but a reversible chiasmatic interconnection which presents perception as a dynamic and, according to Merleau-Ponty, «enigmatic» and «paradoxical» (1969: 256) process between body and world.<sup>7</sup> It is not a process of assimilation or transformation of the object which is perceived but of «inherence» of the perceiving body into the perceived world (256). Our bodies, ourselves, are to Merleau-Ponty «things among things» (256). The phenomenal field is then made of this inextricable blending: «a dimension of our bodily embeddedness in a perceptually coherent environment» (Carman 2005: 51).

«Understanding the world as flesh», states Germain, «leads to the re-establishment of what Merleau-Ponty calls our “perceptual faith”, the world through bodies. It rekindles “our living bond with nature” which disenchantment has all but extinguished» (1993: 116). The following pages analyse how Sacks' *Uncle Tungsten* and *Gratitude* «understand the world as flesh» by focusing on the profound connection that these books establish between Sacks' embodied experience, science, and basic constituents of nature, such as metals and the elements of the periodic table.

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<sup>6</sup> See Olkowski for a thought-provoking reflection on Merleau-Ponty's concept of «intertwining», which she finds problematic as it blurs the distinction between the self and the other.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty asserts that «[t]he unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and reason» (1962: xxi).

### 3. OLIVER SACKS' PHENOMENOLOGICAL NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE COURSE

This section presents Oliver Sack's narrative of the life course as a phenomenological return journey, in Gilbert G. Germain's terms, to an enchanted nature that symbolises order, balance, affection, freedom, transcendence, self-reassurance and self-recognition against chaos, loss, and suffering. *Uncle Tungsten* (2001) and *Gratitude* (2015) are analysed as literary illustrations of a phenomenology of perception that points to the affective side of science and to the embodied connection between humans, self, and nature. Phenomenological intentionality –the sensorial orientation or directedness of the self towards the objects– will be central in the analysis of Sacks' texts. As the following paragraphs will show, they revolve around the description of their narrator as a phenomenal or sentient body in close relation to a natural world portrayed as a phenomenal field. Merleau-Ponty's concepts of «flesh» and «inherence» are at work in Sacks' narrative, where the relationship between human and nature is based on equality and respect. In *Uncle Tungsten* and *Gratitude*, the human body also turns into an objective or sensible body, a thing in itself, in intimate and reciprocal –that is, chiasmatic– relation to the objects around it. Sacks' narrative reflects on the perspectival nature of this sensorial perception of the world, dependant upon context –or «horizon», the phenomenal body's and the object's temporal and spatial coordinates–, which foregrounds the enriching, inexhaustible, enigmatic, and inapprehensible character of the author's relation to the natural world throughout the different stages of his life.

Oliver Sacks died on August 30, 2015. Over the last two years before his death, he wrote the four essays we find in *Gratitude*. Finished just one month before Sacks' death, it is the ultimate example of narrative wisdom,<sup>8</sup> that is, a willingness to open new chapters in his life even at the threshold of death, which for the author does not mean closure but emotional and intellectual growth and a return to the origin of life itself. In *Gratitude* he relates that the cancer in his liver was treated in February 2015 by a procedure called embolisation. He then felt «charged with physical and mental energy» (2015a: 26). He was given, he tells us, «not a remission, but an intermission» (26), a new opportunity to go on celebrating life before his imminent death. His health started to decline in June; his metastases had regrown in his liver and spread beyond it. Before starting a new round of immunotherapy, he «wanted to have a little fun» (28) and travelled to North Carolina to see the lemur research centre at Duke University where he saw in these animals, and in nature, his own origin as a human being:

Lemurs are close to the ancestral stock from which all primates arose, and I am happy to think that one of my own ancestors, fifty million years ago, was a little tree-dwelling creature not so dissimilar to the lemurs of today. (28)

In *Gratitude* Sacks' love for nature, science, and poetry mingle in descriptions of this return journey to nature in the face of death. The author's encounter with the beauty of the universe, through the contemplation one night of what he describes as a Miltonian sky «powdered with stars» (25), strengthened both his sense of transience and death, but also of eternity. Despite the comfort he received from the hundreds of letters of appreciation and love during the last days of his life and the sense that he had lived «a

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<sup>8</sup> On the concept of narrative wisdom see Randall and McKim (2008). Though Lena Englund (2023) does not use this concept, her reflections on *Gratitude* are an insightful analysis of Sacks' narrative wisdom.

good and useful life», «none of it hit [him] as did that night full of stars»: «I told my friends Kate and Allen, “I would like to see such a sky again when I am dying”» (25).

In both *Uncle Tungsten* –Oliver Sacks’ memoirs of his boyhood and puberty and of his early fascination with chemistry– and *Gratitude* Sacks’ life narrative is irremediably entangled with his «enchantment» (2015a: 23), as he says, with nature and science. His love for science is intertwined with his appreciation for organic objects: animals, flowers, trees, ferns, but, also, and most especially, inorganic ones such as metals and the elements belonging to the periodic table created by Russian chemist Dimitri Ivanovich Mendeleev (1834-1907), whom Sacks imagined as a sort of Moses, going up to a chemical Sinai and coming down with the tablets of the periodic law (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015). In «Greetings from the Island of Stability» in *Everything in Its Place*, Sacks defines the «element» «as a substance that could not be decomposed by any chemical means» (2019: 24). They are the basic constituents of nature and, therefore, solid, and permanent but also, to Sacks, full of life and affection. His passion for scientific method and for the elements is beautifully described as «a search for the island of stability» (2019: 228) but

there is profound emotion, too, infusing the scientific search to test a hypothesis. The quest for the magic island shows us that science is far from being coldness and calculation, as many people imagine, but is shot through with passion, longing, and romance. (228)

In *Uncle Tungsten* Sacks explains that he inherited this fervour for science from his family: his maternal grandfather had a «passion for arithmetical calculation» (9), his uncles and aunts were all drawn to scientific education, his cousins were practising scientists or mathematicians, all «in love with science» (9). Both his parents were physicians and encouraged him «to go beneath the surfaces of things» (9) and «to interrogate, to investigate» (9). Sacks’ view of science was the one Merleau-Ponty always wanted to return to. The French philosopher rejected the scientific method which «devotes its energies to the manipulation of things» and «gives up living in them» (1969: 252). He desired to go back to

the ‘there is’ which underlies it [scientific thinking]; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body—not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts. (254)

*Uncle Tungsten* provides Sacks’ readers with this return to a sensible science where he perceives «an integrity, an essential goodness» (2001: 44) and a poetic (125, 131, 259, 313), «lyrical, mystical» (314) resonance that, like art, provides things with life and transports us to a kind of primitive world where bodily perception takes control, where «the look, the feel, the smell of a substance» (44) is never forgotten and where synaesthetic perception rules. Sacks quotes chemist Justus von Liebig to explain that «thinking in terms of phenomena» is the ability to «recall in his imagination a mental picture of what he sees and hears, like the poet and artist» (131). In this sense, the author offers an indissoluble merging of «a romantic» scientific method with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception through the intentionality of his phenomenal body, which, as the French philosopher avers, «can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey



them from above» (1968: 136). It is «a return to that world that precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks» and without the experience of which «the symbols of science would be meaningless» (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: viii).

Sacks' narrative endows science and nature with an existential meaning as they are often related to the author's attempt to come to terms with the hardships and complexities of life. He recalls in *Gratitude* that turning to the nonhuman, turning to science, helped him from his early boyhood to «deal with loss» (2015a: 24), especially when he was sent to Braefield, a boarding school, at six at the outset of the Second World War where he was cruelly bullied. In *Uncle Tungsten*, we are told that his experience there made him feel abandoned by his parents. «My trust in them», he states, «my love for them, was rudely shaken, and with this my belief in God, too» (2001: 25):

The violence exuded by the headmaster at times seemed to contaminate the whole of living nature, so that I saw violence as the very principle of life. What could I do, in these circumstances, other than seek a private place, a refuge where I might be alone, absorb myself without interference from others, and find some sense of stability and warmth. (25)

Back in London, «[a] complete absorption in the worlds of mineralogy and chemistry and physics, in science» (185) helped Sacks escape from the anxiety he felt due to his brother Michael's mental illness, provoked by the abuse and bullying he also endured at boarding schools. He then created his «own world from the neutrality and beauty of nature, so that I would not be swept into the chaos, the madness, the seduction, of his [Michael's].» (185).

Science then turned into «a territory of freedom and friendship in the midst of tyranny and hatred» (25), words that Sacks takes from acclaimed theoretical physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson. Numbers were his first refuge, particularly prime numbers: «they were solid, invariant; they stood unmoved in a chaotic world» (25). This universe of numbers was inextricably linked, Sacks felt, to the mysterious condition of the natural world. During his «long, botanizing walks in the forest» (27) with Auntie Len, she showed him that the:

spiral patterns of the faces of sunflowers [...] were arranged according to the Fibonacci series [...] These ratios, these geometric proportions, she told me, were to be found all over nature – numbers were the way the world was put together. The association of plants, of gardens, with numbers assumed a curiously intense, symbolic form for me. I started to think in terms of a [...] garden of numbers, a magical secret, wonderful garden. It was a garden hidden from, inaccessible to, the bullies and the headmaster; and a garden, too, where I somehow felt welcome and befriended [...] my aunt had shown me that my garden of numbers was doubly magical – not just delightful and friendly, always there, but part of the plan on which the whole universe was built. (27)

«Numbers became my friends», remembers the author in *Gratitude*, «when I returned to London at ten, the elements and the periodic table became my companions» (2015a: 26). During his childhood, metals achieved real entity for him when they were seen, touched, and heard:

Many of my childhood memories are of metals: these seemed to exert a power on me from the start. They stood out, conspicuous, against the heterogeneity

of the world, by their shining, gleaming quality, their silverness, their smoothness and weight. They seemed cool to the touch, and they rang when they were struck. (Sacks, 2001: 3)

As we can see, Sacks creates the space of absolute symbiosis and overlapping between the self and the world around it to the extent that the description of these metals is only possible if made through references to the bodily senses. This works as a phenomenal field where the «sense experience» turns into a «vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life» (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 52–53). In *Uncle Tungsten*, the author describes how, as a child, for example, he «loved coins –their glitter, their weights, their different shapes and sizes» (2001: 13). Metals were the basic constituents of things which evoke affective family memories inseparable from the sensation they produced. Sacks remembers, for example, the «heavy gold sovereign [his] father wore on his watch chain» (13) or his mother’s «necklace of polished yellow pieces of amber» (6) that, when rubbed, generate a «tiny snap, spark» (6) that he could feel and hear when he put it up to his ear. His mother’s golden engagement ring’s heaviness made it inviolable (3), and its diamond was «icy» (4), a feeling, the narrator states, «I was never to forget» (4). He never forgot either how his uncle Dave –the Uncle Tungsten of the title and his mother’s brother– who «manufactured light-bulbs with filaments of fine tungsten wire» (7),

loved the density of the tungsten he made [...] He loved to handle it –the wire, the powder, but the massy little bars and ingots most of all. He caressed them, balanced them (tenderly, it seemed to me) in his hands. ‘Feel it, Oliver’, he would say thrusting a bar at me. ‘Nothing in the world feels like sintered tungsten’. He would tap the little bars and they would emit a deep clink. ‘The sound of tungsten’, Uncle Dave would say, ‘nothing like it’. (8)

Sacks’ depiction of the intimate relationship between body and object inevitably brings to mind Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception as a «magical relation» whereby «I lend them [visible entities] my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance» (1968: 146). This synergy between body and elements reaches its peak in *Uncle Tungsten* when Sacks imagines this element within his uncle’s «lungs and bones, in every vessel and viscus, every tissue of his body» (2001: 7) which gave it «a strength and enduringness almost more than human» (7). The objective/phenomenal –or sensible/sentient– body is at play here as Sacks is evoking the reversibility of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic «phenomenology of the flesh» where things are «an annex or prolongation» of the body, they are «incrusted into the flesh, they are part of its full definition» as «the world is made of the same stuff of the body» (Merleau-Ponty, 1969: 256) and «[t]hings have an internal equivalent in [us]» (257).

Although the communion with the basic components of nature empowers the body, they also make it vulnerable: the body, Sacks discovers as a child, is made of the «same elements as composed the sun and stars» (2001: 5), of atoms «that might once have been in a distant star» (5). He experienced it as a frightening reality as those atoms «might fly apart at any time» (5). So even though this alliance between body and nature reassures him and gives him a sense of stability –«I needed to think of metals as stable, like gold – able to stave off the losses and ravages of time» (4)–, it also evokes a sense of both bodily and existential dissolution closely associated with the phenomenological assumption that everything around him is an enigma. In *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks describes all the precious

and puzzling objects that he cherished during his childhood, such as magnets, a crystal radio, and clock dials, whose «tireless coruscations» (6) gave him «a sense of invisible rays and forces, a sense that beneath the familiar, visible world of colors and appearances there lay a dark, hidden world of mysterious laws and phenomena» (6).

In *Uncle Tungsten* the author's fascination with the discovery of the world around him through observing and communing with objects that he perceives as hiding mysterious enigmas in need of being deciphered is directly related to the perspectival disposition of phenomena. From an early age he was mesmerised by the «magical or sacred quality» (11) of the rooms at home, such as the library and his parents' surgery, full of frightening and at the same time fascinating objects that he examined closely. He crawled into the cupboard under the stairs, full of plates and cutlery for Passover, which concealed a further space behind which he imagined as a «secret passageway» (14) where he could hide. But, above all, the «most beautiful and mysterious» (14) homely object in his eyes was the panelled stained glass front door. Every panel, each a different shape and colour, provided Sacks with «a completely different experience» of the «whole world» (14), which acquired various appearances depending on the colour of the panel he chose to see it through. Influenced by his visual migraines from an early age, Sacks' decision to study the workings of the human brain was closely related to his desire to know how the world could be deciphered through the senses, particularly sight, as he reveals in his memoir *On the Move: A Life* (2015): «It was especially the physiology of the senses that fascinated me –how did we see color, depth, movement? How did we recognize anything? How did we make sense of the world, visually?» (2015b: 14). His experience with the stained glass showed him how differently the world could be seen depending on perspective. Not only was the colour of the panel what turned the world into a different space, it was also his position as seer which transformed that space: «Most intriguing was the yellowish green glass, for this seemed to shimmer, sometimes yellow and sometimes green, depending on where I stood and how the sun hit it» (2001: 14). Perspective then became essential in Sacks' perception process and offered different dimensions to the lived experience, which was also altered by the impact of the natural laws which actively participate in this incarnate experience retained over time. During the Blitz, the stained glass was shattered by a bomb blast but «its colors, intensified by nostalgia perhaps, still remained preternaturally vivid in my memory» (2001: 229), writes Sacks.

The merging of perception, perspective, and nature acquires a liberating power in *Uncle Tungsten's* narrative construction of suffering. The author transforms his childhood remembrance of nature as a «wonderful, though brief, release from the shut-in-ness, the misery, the smell of the school» (20) into a picture-like perspectival memory. He recalls getting out of the school to the surrounding fields and stopping to contemplate a particular object he felt a bond with:

There was a particular tree in a field that I loved, its silhouette against the sky affected me in a strange way. I still see it, and the winding path through the fields that led to it, when my mind drifts back. The sense that nature, at least, existed outside the dominion of school was deeply reassuring. (21)

It is the natural context, that is, the horizon in Merleau-Ponty's terms, in which the object is inserted, and the body's spatial and temporal coordinates which give shape to this perceptual experience. This is a poignant illustration of a phenomenal body fully attuned to the world, positioned in a perceptual field in which the object that is perceived concentrates a whole segment of Sacks' life. The pictorial depth of the recalled image and

the comforting effect of the perceived distance of the tree, seen not just from a particular viewpoint but also at a particular time during the life course, turn the vision of that tree into a phenomenon with a long-life effect which is to be retained in Sacks' mind for the rest of his life.

The sense of loss and restitution through nature and the elements functions in Sacks' life narrative as an element that bonds childhood and old age together. As A. Truman Schwartz states, *Uncle Tungsten* is the chronicle of Sacks' «love affair with chemistry» after it had been «dormant for 50 years» (2002: 312). Sacks himself defines it in *On the Move* as a combination of «memoir with a sort of history of chemistry» (2015b: 290). Sacks explains in *Uncle Tungsten* that the end of his fascination with chemistry during his adolescence was partly due to the advent of quantum mechanics, which he felt as a threat to classical chemistry experiments, where bodily perception and a close intimacy with the elements was pivotal:

Did this mean that chemists of the future (if they existed) would never actually need to handle a chemical; might never see the colors of vanadium salts, never smell a hydrogen selenide, never admire the form of a crystal; might live in a colorless, scentless mathematical world? This, for me, seemed an awful prospect, for I, at least, needed to smell and touch and feel, to place myself, my senses, in the middle of the perceptual world. (2001: 312)

He admired «the lovingly detailed, naturalistic, descriptive chemistry of the nineteenth century, not the new chemistry of the quantum age» (2001: 313). At the age of 14 he felt that he «had come to the end of the road, the end of my road, at least, that I had taken my journey into chemistry as far as I could» (313). In retrospect, he sees this journey as «a sort of sweet interlude, having left behind the horrors and fears of Braefield» (313) and entered «a region of order» (313). Now, he felt he «had been expelled from the garden of numbers, the garden of Mendeleev, the magic play realms to which I had had admittance as a boy» (312). However, this affair, apparently ended in his adolescence, was rekindled again when in 1997, at the age of 64, the chemist Roald Hoffmann sent him a parcel with a poster of the periodic table, a chemical catalogue, and a little bar of tungsten. The description of the re-encounter with this metal is another alluring illustration of Sack's sensorial and embodied interaction in the phenomenal field:

a little bar of a very dense, greyish metal, which fell onto the floor as I opened the package, landing with a resonant clonk. I recognized it at once by its feel and its sound (“the sound of sintered tungsten,” my uncle used to say, “nothing like it”). The clonk served as a sort of Proustian mnemonic, and instantly brought Uncle Tungsten to mind, sitting in his lab in his wing collar. (315)

Sacks realised that «[t]he passion for chemistry, which [he] had thought dead at fourteen, ha[d] clearly survived, deep inside [him], throughout the intervening years» (315). He suddenly had the desire «for a ball of cadmium, or to feel the coldness of diamonds against [his] face» (318). Colours of lilacs in spring were for him «that of divalent vanadium» (318), radishes «evoked [d] the smell of selenium» (318) and he had dreams of «eating hamburgers made of scadium» (318). Years later, in *Gratitude*, Sacks confesses that his childhood infatuation with chemistry was reawakened over many stages of his life –marked by his stay at Braefield, but also his mother's rejection of his homosexuality (2015a: 36), his severe skin condition during his adolescence (2019: 24),

his «near-suicidal addiction to amphetamines in the 1960s» (2015a: 38), and his face blindness— and mainly when he faced death:

Times of stress throughout my life have led me to turn, or return, to the physical sciences, a world where there is no life, but also no death. And now, at this juncture, when death is no longer an abstract concept, but a presence—an all-too-close, not-to-be-denied presence—I am again surrounding myself, as I did when I was a boy, with metals and minerals, little emblems of eternity. (26)

The most appealing and meaningful metaphor of *Gratitude* is the periodic table described by E. R. Scerri as «one of the most powerful icons in science» (2020: xv) which, as J. H. Maar and A. Maar assert, has turned into an object of «aesthetic value» and «philosophical inquiry» (2019: 29) and is a recurrent symbol in Sacks' life narrative.<sup>9</sup> Perception was intrinsic to the very conception of the table. Mendeleev accepted that, despite scientific progress, humankind was «unable to comprehend the “thing-in-itself”, i.e. substances as mind-independent entities» and thought that they could only be studied by «their properties or by their relations to our organs of sense and to other substances and bodies» (qtd. in Maar & Maar 2019: 39). Sacks' desk was transformed into a periodic table itself, full of samples of the elements that he felt protected him from chaos, uncertainty, and loss and that, now, at the end of his life he could touch, see, and smell every day again.

As a boy, he was convinced that the elements of the periodic table «were indeed the elemental building blocks of the universe, that the whole universe was here, in microcosm» (Sacks, 2019: 11). When, at ten, he first observed the periodic table at the reopening of the South Kensington Science Museum in 1945 he experienced what he calls «a real epiphany» (10) that was a truly sensorial encounter: «In this first, sensuous glance I saw the table as a gorgeous banquet, a huge table set with eighty odd different dishes» (Sacks, 2001: 188). This first visual contact with a tangible, fleshly, and appetising periodic table functions as the ground for reflective thought about transcendence. In «Remembering South Kensington» in *Everything in Its Place* Sacks recalls that very moment as

an overwhelming sense of Truth and Beauty [...] an actual vision of the eternal cosmic order [...] [a] feeling of grandeur, the immutability of nature's laws, and of how they might prove graspable by us if we sufficiently sought them—this came to me overwhelmingly when I was a boy of ten, standing before the periodic table in the Science Museum in South Kensington. It has never left me, and fifty years later it is undimmed. My faith and life were set at that moment. (2019: 11)

In *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks again describes this insightful experience as a revelation of the ultimate sense of beauty, order, truth, mystery, stability, human mental achievement, and spirituality (2001: 203). He reads, interprets, even mentally wanders about, and, I would say, mentally inhabits, the periodic table which, despite its mysterious and labyrinthine nature, like the «enchanted garden of Mendeleev», gives him self-assurance and sense of recognition.

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<sup>9</sup> On the iconic nature of the periodic table see also Marshall (2000; 2003); Balaram (2008); Poliakoff and Tang (2015); and Shaik, Cremades & Álvarez (2019).

Seeing the table, “getting” it, altered my life. I took to visiting it as often as I could. I copied it into my exercise book and carried it everywhere; I got to know it so well –visually and conceptually– that I could mentally trace its paths in every direction, going up a group, then turning right on a period, stopping, going down one, yet always knowing where I was. It was like a garden, the garden of numbers I had loved as a child –but unlike this, it was real, a key to the universe. I spent hours now, enchanted, totally absorbed, wandering, making discoveries, in the enchanted garden of Mendeleev. (194)

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

In *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Sacks states that all of us have «a life story, an inner narrative-whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives [...] Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions, and, not the least, our discourse, our spoken narration» (1998: 110–111). Sacks’ lifelong absorption in science, nature and the elements of the periodic table makes the author –probably inspired by Primo Levi’s acclaimed book *Il Sistema Periodico* (1975) (Maar & Maar, 2019: 44), which Sacks greatly admired (2001: 314)– turn them into the main characters of essential episodes of his own inner narrative. They are presented as symbols that encapsulate his whole existence by representing the different temporal stages of his life, his relation to others, his feelings of solitude, vulnerability, but also strength and hope.

In *Gratitude*, Sacks writes that since he was a boy, when he first learned about atomic numbers, «elements and birthdays have been intertwined» (2015a: 5): «At eleven, I could say, “I am sodium (element 11)”» (5). At 79 he was gold, at 80, he was Mercury (5). At one end of his writing table, he had element 81, Thallium, «in a charming box ... It says: “Happy Thallium Birthday,” a souvenir of my eighty-first birthday» (26); then «a realm [was] devoted to lead, element 82, for [his] just celebrated eighty-second birthday» (26). A «beautifully machined piece of beryllium (element 4)» (29) was also present in his desk to remind him of his childhood, and of «how long ago my soon to end life began» (29). In *On the Move: A Life*, Sacks explains how the periodic table also helped him with his face blindness. Recognition, attachment, was made possible through the elements:

On another birthday, knowing that I loved the periodic table, Steve and Rhonda invited everyone to dress as a particular element. I am rather bad at names and faces, but I never forget an element. (There was one man who came to the party with my old friend Carol Burnett. I do not remember his name, and I cannot remember his face, but I will always remember him as argon.) Steve was xenon, element 54, another noble gas. (2015b: 295)

The reference to the noble gases brings to mind the inert ones, which to Sacks had always reflected his feelings of solitude since childhood (Sacks, 2001: 211). In an interview he gave about the table of elements, the neurologist remarked: «I was a rather shy kid with a difficulty forming relationships and I sometimes compared myself to the inert gases (they are very isolated, they react with nothing) because I felt they also had difficulties forming relationships» (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015). This complete symbiosis between self and object is also reflected in his perception of bismuth, element 83, a birthday that he knows he will not celebrate. Also on his desk, Sacks relates it to his feelings of vulnerability and to his ethical stance towards the other manifested throughout

his life in his love for the marginalised. Despite being on the threshold of death, Sacks connects bismuth with a positive future:

There is something hopeful, something encouraging, about having '83' around. Moreover, I have a soft spot for bismuth, a modest grey metal, often unregarded, ignored, even by metal lovers. My feeling as a doctor for the mistreated or marginalized extends into the inorganic world and finds a parallel in my feeling for bismuth. (2015a: 29)

Sacks' affective orientation towards the elements displayed on his desk had its origins, as this article has shown, in his lifelong need for stability and order in the face of chaos and helplessness. In *Uncle Tungsten* this affective orientation towards things is beautifully expressed when Sacks recalls that amongst all his collections as a boy – mineral samples, coins, and stamp albums– the one «closest to his heart» was a collection of «chemical bus tickets» (2001: 76). London bus tickets bore letters and numbers and the combination of many of them represented a symbol of an element and its atomic weight. After getting the tickets with O36 and S32 on them, representing his initials, Sacks decided to start the collection: «W184, tungsten, gave me particular pleasure, partly because it provided my missing middle initial» (76). He always carried his bus ticket collection with him, in contact with his body: «it gave me the sense that I had, in the space of a single cubic inch, the whole universe, its building blocks, in my pocket» (76). This fond boyhood memory is the ultimate illustration that, as this article has shown, Sacks' narrative is a return to an enchanted discourse in which science becomes human and allows the author to reach a sense of self and a bodily, and affective, alignment with the world around him, which he perceives as a reassuring and enigmatic macrocosm to be explored. The neurologist portrays himself as a phenomenal body in a perceptual field in which it is only through the supremacy of the senses that he can relate to a natural world. This connection with nature gives him strength till the very last of his days, when, in *Gratitude*, he expresses his gratefulness for «living a good and worthwhile life –achieving a peace within oneself» (2015a: 20) and, above all, for having been conscious, as Merleau-Ponty would have put it, of his «being in the world», that is, as Sacks finally concludes, of «hav[ing] been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure» (Sacks, 2015a: 20).

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