

Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?

Addaing with Noam Chomsky and the Illustration of Genius

SHAKIL RABBI

Is the Man Who is Tall Happy is pretty to look at. It is an animated documentary laying out a meandering conversation between two men (as of now, also free to stream on Youtube). We would call it an *adda*. The first is the interviewer himself, Michael Gondry, a French director famous for the modern-classic *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The second is Noam Chomsky, linguist,

are few other writers whose work measures up to the ethical and critical power of Chomsky's oeuvre as public intellectual. He makes the complexities of US imperialism simple and commonsensical. Unlike most other leftist, academic critics of empire, however, his public intellectual writings is also marked for its plain, lucid style, clearly communicating the crimes of imperialism in prose anyone with a secondary education and general English competence would understand.

I came around to the other Chomsky, the linguist and analytic philosopher, while completing my doctoral work. I decided to read his academic monographs and lectures on language and try to understand what the "Chomskyan revolution" in the human sciences meant. These works were difficult — some were incomprehensible to me — but reading them was eye-opening to the nature of genius. It took me a while to grasp his concept of "generative grammar" — simply put, people's innate ability to creatively use language and create order out of language — and how it broke the behaviorist approach to studying language — which said people take in language and reproduce it. It might seem commonsensical, but it was revolutionary in all domains of human sciences; it was what Thomas Kuhn called a paradigm shift (there is a great amount of debate on the politics of the Chomskyan Revolution, some of which can be accessed on a nat-times dramatic series on Opendemocracy.net.)

The beauty of *Is the Man Who is Tall Happy* is that Gondry is able to flesh out this Chomsky; though it must also be said that their conversations do talk about his biography and social beliefs. Yet the focus of the film is their conversation about language and how human beings might think, which Gondry illustrates in beautiful, little animation. Though not a linguist, academic, or philosopher, or because he is none of those things, Gondry is able to present a picture of Chomskyan linguistics and philosophy that is clear and subtlety thoughtful.

Take what Chomsky calls "psychic continuity" and how it represents an example of "cognitive endowment." Both terms, in their technical usage, need explanation and elaboration. Psychic

continuity is the phenomenon wherein things are inscribed with discrete and unique characteristics by us. There are several examples provided in the film, one being Chomsky's story about a book his two-years old grandchildren like (two-year olds have developed their sense of object permanence.) In the book a baby donkey called Sylvester is turned into stone. He goes to his mama and papa donkey who do not recognize him anymore because he is a stone. His grandchildren, Chomsky tells us, always try to tell the mama and papa donkeys their mistake, that the stone donkey is Sylvester.

Chomsky points out that it is odd that his two-years old grandchildren can recognize that stone in the book as Sylvester. The stone is not a donkey but they are able to see it as such. This merits questioning what exactly makes

have been replaced. Is the "restored" ship still the same as the original? Second, suppose that each of the removed pieces were stored in a warehouse, and after some time, technology develop that cures their rot and these pieces are put back together to make a ship. Is this "reconstructed" ship the original ship? And if so, is the restored ship in the harbor still the original ship as well?

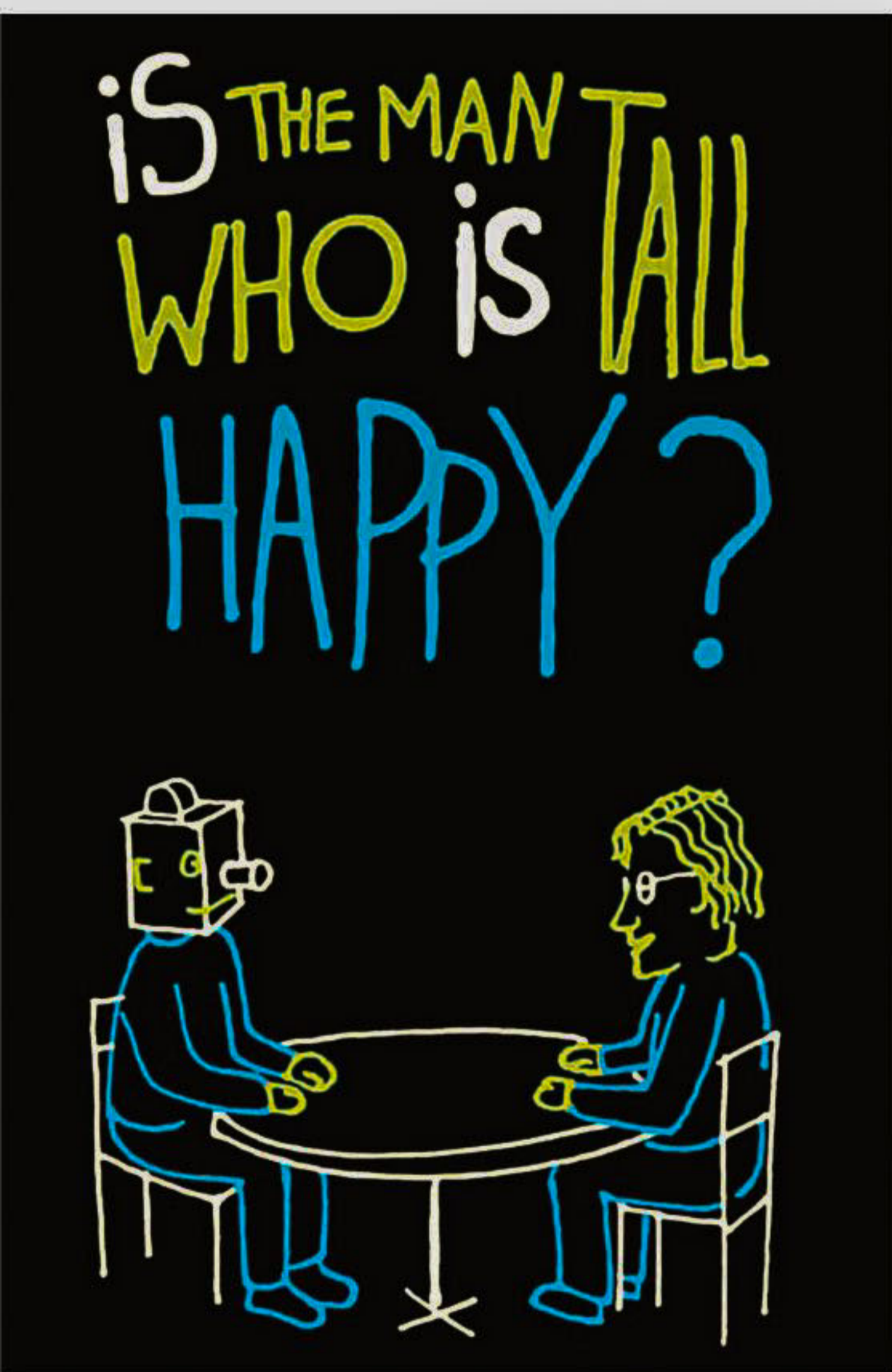
Some people will say that the material of the ship is what makes the ship; they will also agree that it cannot be so because the first is also the ship of Theseus. This the problem of *psychic continuity*. That things we refer to in basic conceptualizations of the world are inscribed with an essence by us that does not correspond to their actual material characteristics. The language we use, it goes to follow, does not refer to anything in the outside world; in

rogative form of the question is "Is the man who is tall happy?" as opposed to "Is the man who tall happy?" The conclusion he provides is that we have think of the phrase "the man who is tall" as one unit, a phrasal noun. Specifically, it is the N of the sentence formulae as it applies to English, Sentence= Subject (Noun) + Predicate (Verb + Objects). So, to make the sentence into an interrogative form we have to shift the verb to the front: Is the man who is tall happy?

Our cognitive endowment, or way of interpreting language, means we take ignore individual words and take in phrases as units of meaning. In our minds the structural integrity in a sentence is made up of bits of phrases rather than words, and consequently grammar is about putting phrases together rather than words together. This also makes a focus on pedantic, prescriptive grammar pointless. There are too many permutations of phrases in any students' utterances for us to come up with rules for and teach. What we have to focus on, it follows, is how we think, and how we can think better.

These are implications of what is said rather than explicitly being spelled out. What is stated, though, would seem esoteric if Gondry were less of a filmmaker. The movie works because its able to navigate through the conversations with Gondry's charming drawings, and personal explanations of what he understood as being said by his illustrious interlocutor. The movie is, in sum, a great *adda* about ideas with a humane genius. It is told with genuine warmth and one cannot but smile when one hears Chomsky snickering like a schoolboy in the recordings as he watches the animations Gondry makes of their conversations. It touches on multiple topics of profound philosophical and scientific consequence in an arresting manner. Viewers will finish with a sense that they understood what was said even though it might seem too abstract. But they will also leave with a nagging feeling that they had only gotten the tip of the iceberg that is the meaning of what was said.

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philosopher, *public intellectual par excellence*; the most cited living academic author and voted the "most important living intellectual" by a global poll in 2005.

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Sylvester the donkey, Sylvester the donkey? How are children so young that they cannot even string together words coherently able to recognize the stone as Sylvester? The answer to this does not rely on the appearance of things on the page. It also certainly is not inherent to the form of the stories themselves because his grandchildren are still not mentally developed enough to comprehend discourse functions such as narrative cohesion.

There is a philosophical thought-experiment called "The Ship of Theseus" dating back to Ancient Greece. It goes that suppose a ship sailed by the hero Theseus (the mythic founder of Athens) in a great battle has been kept in a harbor as a museum piece. As the years go by some of the wooden parts begin to rot and are replaced by new ones. After a century or so, all of the parts

technical nomenclature "language is not propositional."

More significant still, Chomsky says as he lays his cards on the table, this psychic continuity is a part of our overall cognitive endowment, a way we cannot but perceive of the world because it is part of our biological wiring. He then goes onto prognosticate that human beings are limited in the ways we can think within a range. Our brains cannot go beyond that way of perceiving the world and therefore we cannot experience — and therefore comprehend it otherwise.

This view has had significant implications in our ways of thinking about language and language learning. The title of the film comes from a sentence used to illustrate this. The sentence is this: The man who is tall is happy. Chomsky rationalizes why the inter-

A Bibliophile's Review of Bargain Buys

The Fine Art of Literary Mayhem: A Lively Account of Famous Writers & Their Feuds. Myrick Land. ISBN-10: 0938530119. Lexikos. 1983

REVIEWED BY RAANA HAIDER

Phobia and mania remain inexplicably internalised conditions. Such was my dilemma as I stood at the crossroad one Saturday morning waiting for my friend as she undertook her Saturday errands in Purley, Croydon, outside London. To my left, stood the Cat Protection Society outlet. Such charity fundraising shops remain part and parcel of the British High Street commercial scenario; one of the earliest and most well-known being Oxfam. Promoting a particular cause; be it autism, cancer, dementia - such charitable organisations solicit knick-knacks, trivia and treasures as donations for purchases by those who see a treasure in someone else's trash. And there I was debating whether to enter the Cat Protection Society given the fact that I am prone to feline phobia. Simultaneously, being a bibliophile and knowing that such outlets remain a rich source of 'gently used' books for book lovers with ample time to browse; I was in a bind.

A snap decision had me enter the premises and swiftly survey the surrounding for any felines. There were none. Walking past clothes and curtains, pots and pans, shoes and serving dishes — a veritable trove of vintage objects — I headed straight for a cane shelf offering books at the back of the store. And my eyes fell on a soft yellow-hue paged paperback with a stain on its cover. The intriguing and challenging title settled the selection. *The Fine Art of Literary Mayhem: A Lively Account of Famous Writers and Their Feuds* by Myrick Land. The price? 99 pence! Surely an ultimate bargain buy for a 273 page book. I gave One Pound at the counter. Received a pence in change. Quickly dropped the one pence into the donation box and walked out; a cat's whisker of a purchase. A wet wipe of the stain left the cover in fine condition. A spill of a sip had left its mark. I would like to imagine the previous owner sitting with a cuppa tea as an appropriate accompaniment to a unique book title.

What we have is a lively collection of anecdotes from the war of words and battle of

books between a host of literary giants; Dickens, Disraeli, Norman Mailer, George Bernard Shaw, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and innumerable others. The author long-time Senior Editor of *Look* magazine, a writer and teacher of journalism has compiled an amusing and revealing scenario of the literary feuds and bitterness that so consumed writers whom we revere as "Immortals." Placed on pedestals by us mortals, we are now provided glimpses of human frailties and their vulnerable feet of clay. Literary icons express acerbic words, sarcastic wit and painful puns; exposing fault-lines that penetrate the lofty reserve. And Land has brought to light such

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little known and remarkable revelations in a compelling narrative.

"My best advice is don't read it; my second best is don't drop it on your foot" is the declaration voiced by a *Newsweek* magazine reviewer regarding James A. Michener's 865-page novel *Chesapeake* novel in 1978. The fate of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, now universally recognized as a literary masterpiece met scorn

and misjudgment when it appeared in 1925. One Springfield in *Republican* was fiercely dismissive: "A little slack, a little soft, more than a little artificial, *The Great Gatsby* falls into the class of negligible novels." Five short words wiped out the literary output of Jack Kerouac, who never looked back after committing words to paper. In a powerful punch Truman Capote famously declared: "That's not writing - that's typing." The stand-off between two Russian literary icons - Turgenev and Dostoevski involved some financial assistance extended by Turgenev to his fellow compatriot. Through long-drawn out exasperating and emotional years; Turgenev

finally cries out in despair: "I beg you....to forget my existence." Such pathos is inevitably disconcerting for a reader. On an infinitely lighter note: George Bernard Shaw boldly and impishly attacked Shakespeare by declaring: "It would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him."

The author in his closing chapter 'Gentlemen! Let's not call names' offers us a memorable instance of a fallen friendship. For over a decade Vladimir Nabokov sent many of his works to the renowned critic Edmund Wilson for his comments. This custom did not take place with Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Nabokov himself was hesitant about publishing it for as Myrick Land writes: "...he (Nabokov) thought it might be best to publish the book under a pseudonym because of his fear that the story of the pursuit of the nymphet Lolita by the obsessed Humbert might be judged pornographic by narrow-minded readers, and that this might endanger his career as a lecturer at Cornell." *Lolita* was eventually published in 1958 and the rest remains literary history. However, the slight developed into a chasm of mistrust and eventual fall-out in their once close personal and professional relationship.

Given a mentor/mentee, successful/struggling, older/younger relationship between writers, critics, publishers and reviewers; certain aspects of human behaviour rears its ugly head, notes Myrick Land in his various exposes of the rage and rift that emerges between two earlier amiable personalities. Case in point often being the scenario involving Nabokov/Wilson. The author observes: "He (Wilson) liked the obscure and struggling Nabokov, but he may have been first surprised and then baffled by the extraordinary change in the writer's (Nabokov's) fortunes." There does exist numerous literary spheres out there - all between two covers.

Raana Haider is a literary pilgrim.

