OROTATING PARAFUNDITIES: READING HOPKINS, DICKINSON, MURRAY, AND CARSON AUTISTICALLY

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Abstract

Autistic people use and understand language differently than do non-autistic people; this principle is chief among diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and yet little attention has been paid to this phenomenon as it pertains to autistic engagement with literature. This thesis examines the generative potential of what I have termed "autistic close reading" to unlock new interpretations of work by four poets whose writing has been considered unusual, impenetrable, perplexing, and *weird:* Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), Les Murray (1938-2019), and Anne Carson (1950-). Accepting the premise that autistic reading experiences are, like many autistic experiences, "particular and peculiar," I look at how autistic cognitive style, sensory responsiveness, communication differences, and social alterity work to create unique relationships between autistic readers and the literary material we enjoy. Engaging a taxonomy of autistic language usage developed by theorist Julia Miele Rodas, I examine the distinct overlap between autistic expression and formal poetic technique, and I explore potential implications of this overlap in terms of language use *and* language reception by autistic people. Drawing on work by Jack Halberstam, M. Remi Yergeau, Ralph John Savarese, and Nick Walker, this thesis takes a neuroqueer and neurocosmopolitan approach to Hopkins, Dickinson, Murray, and Carson as cultural figures, and proposes new contexts to elucidate their poems and projects. The dissertation is bracketed by first-person commentary on my own relationship to language as an autistic poet, and on my experiences as an autistic researcher. As my title indicates, this thesis is as much about the act of reading while autistic as it is about the critical assertions engendered by such an act.

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Introduction

Please love poets we are the first

autistics. Love this secret no one knows it.

—Hannah Emerson, "Becoming Mud"

This dissertation is about autism and poetry; specifically, it is about *my* autism and the poetry of four poets whose writing elicits in me a particular and peculiar kind of readerly delight: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), Les Murray (1938-2019), and Anne Carson (1950-). My research and reading have been instrumental in my attempt to make meaning of my own experiences of later-in-life autism diagnosis.

Poetry is a site of meaning-making. This is so for the poet who finds their way to some kind of truth through a process of thinking, feeling, writing, reciting, listening, and revising; it is so, too, for the reader who turns to poetry to make sense of the world. For every critic or instructor lamenting that nobody reads poetry anymore, there are scores of readers searching for the perfect poem to capture the meaning of a moment. Spouses-to-be pore over anthologies of love poems to find just the right verse to include in their wedding ceremonies. The recently bereaved seek lines of comfort to help make sense of their loss. Politicians share poems during times of collective tragedy and of shared celebration; poets laureate are named by municipalities and nations to mark the pivotal events in the lives of their communities; revolutionaries write

back against the agents of corruption. Adrienne Rich writes that poetry begins in "the crossing of trajectories of two (or more) elements that might not otherwise have known simultaneity. When this happens, a piece of the universe is revealed as if for the first time" (*What is Found* 8). This revelation is a kind of meaning-making.

Each poet has their own set of these "elements" of which Rich speaks, the crossing of which reveals meaning in the form of poetry. For me, one of the elements is autism. As an autistic person, I process information differently than do members of the allistic (that is, non-autistic) majority. I communicate differently. I experience sensory data differently. My relationships to time, to physical space, to memory, and to emotion, are all measurably unlike the relationships considered neurologically typical. Communication, sensation, memory, emotion: these are the things from which we make meaning. If mine are out of sync with the norm, then I must, by extension, make meaning differently. That is: being autistic means that I *mean* differently.

This thesis is a glimpse into the space where autistic cognitive, sensory, and communicative differences meet the formal, sonic, and semantic phenomena through which poetry is made meaningful. My title, "Orotating Parafundities," comes from a poem by Australian poet Les Murray, who is the subject of my fourth chapter. In his poem "Portrait of the Autist as New World Driver," Murray offers us a poetic "you" who, when allowed to escape the constraints of social norms and expectations, "can let out language / to exercise […] can rejoice in tongues / orotate parafundities" (*Vernacular Republic* 34). Throughout this thesis, I too "rejoice in tongues," and I rejoice in poets and scholars who rejoice as I do. I take my cue from other autistic scholars and writers and begin, autistically, by inserting myself as subject; the word "autism," after all, was coined by doctors to describe patients' self-focus, their self-containedness. Researcher Elizabeth Fein notes "a particular irony" in "naming a condition of intimate co-

existence with the outside world by a word that means self-contained isolation," and calls it "a kind of un-naming: naming a thing as its opposite" (132). *Auto-* is typically a prefix; *ism* is, of course, a suffix; the word *autism* is just a suffix appended to a prefix, with nothing in between. Self-*what*-ism? Self-ism? Self-ness-ism? The word itself struggles to make meaning, to *mean.*

One response to this struggle over autistic meaning-making has been the emergence of the cross-disciplinary field of critical autism studies. Grounded in and guided by the experiences and voices of autistic people, critical autism studies is dedicated to inquiry around autism as a human condition or "mode of being" rather than as a medical mystery to be solved or syndrome to be cured (O'Dell et al.). An offshoot of critical disability studies, critical autism studies recognizes that, as a phenomenon, autism occupies a unique space in the popular imagination and in the lived realities of autistic people. Traditional autism research has excluded input from autistic people, limiting their role to that of subject of study; this has led to misinterpretation and mischaracterization of autistic traits and behaviours. Critical autism studies seeks to create a framework to address and repair this damage by centering the expertise and experience of autistic people, and by deferring to autistic individuals rather than relying on analyses that take neurotypical norms and expectations as baselines.

In their introduction to the 2023 *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies,* editors Damian Milton and Sara Ryan identify a tension between the well-resourced biomedical research that views autism as "curable" (and, indeed, as *a condition that should be cured),* and "the historical, cultural, and social context of the production of autism knowledge" which contradicts and seeks to upend the medical model. "We should," they write, "be embracing the ways in which, conceptually, autism always exceeds and confounds, and how it is always 'yet to know', rather than seeking to cure and potentially eradicate it" (2). Milton and Ryan point to

the 2013 volume *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference,* edited by Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini, as having been first to define a set of considerations for critical autism studies. The considerations are:

1. Careful attention to the ways in which power relations shape the field of autism
2. Concern to advance new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy, and popular culture
3. Commitment to develop new analytical frameworks using inclusive and nonreductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature *and* culture of autism. The interdisciplinary research required (particularly in the social sciences and humanities) demands sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic complexity of this highly individualized, relational (dis)order. (Davidson and Orsini 12)

In the decade since Davidson and Orsini set out their framework, scholars in the field have sought to refine and re-define critical autism studies (Woods et al.; Milton and Ryan); the dialogue has been robust, and has kept as its core the imperative to unsettle power dynamics between autistic and allistic people. For my part, I have kept these three considerations from Davidson and Orsini at the heart of my project, identifying and critiquing power relations, offering empowering and generative narratives around autistic experience, and working across disciplinary knowledge to study my chosen area of autistic culture: autistic language usage and its resonances with poetry.

A portrait of the autist as a young poet

I was fifteen years old when I read my poetry aloud in front of an audience for the first time. I had submitted a piece to the junior category of a provincial writing competition and was among the winners invited to read at the awards ceremony. The awards were presented at the Fluvarium, a research and education facility in my hometown of St. John's, Newfoundland Labrador. The building opened its doors in 1991; today it doubles as an offbeat venue for weddings and children's birthday parties. The awards ceremony was likely my first time at the Fluvarium. I remember the peaked wooden ceiling and not much else. I don't remember who hosted the ceremony or which literary luminaries were being recognized in the adult category; I don't remember how large the audience was or what sort of mood they were in; I don't even remember which parent, if any, accompanied me to the event. But I remember the ceiling, and the sensation of floating up to it and observing myself at the lectern below while I read my piece. I remember my voice, amplified by the microphone and by the room's strange acoustics, and I remember hearing it as though it were coming from someone other than me. I remember the peaceful sensation of reading from the page, of moving from word to word, knowing in each moment exactly what I was supposed to say next.

I didn't have a vocabulary then for what I now know as autistic experience; I was just a bit of a weird, quiet, bookish kid. Not knowing quite what I was, I made meaning for myself with the closest thing I could find: poetry. In his 2022 book *May Tomorrow Be Awake,* autistic poet and educator Chris Martin writes of his own experience, which is remarkably similar:

> I have come to foreground neurodivergence in my way of moving through the world, but in the 90s there were no positive associations with the "deficits" inherent in my

> "disorder," nor was there a community of support. Instead, I found another label that seemed to suit how I wanted to be in the world: *poet"* (7).

As a teenager, *poet* provided me with the perfect camouflage. It allowed me a degree of whimsical eccentricity and gave the adults around me a context for my non-sequiturs and unusual speech patterns. Alignment with the category *poet* meant that I wasn't just permitted to luxuriate in the weirdness of words: I was encouraged and rewarded. Words were how I endeared myself to teachers and parents. Words were my first playthings, and my best, most constant friends. Writing was where I could make up for my day-to-day failures to say the right thing at the right time. Reading poetry gave me the tools to make sense of my world: *this* is what people mean when they say "love"; *this* is what people mean when they say "despair."

Thirty years or so after my triumphant, transcendent reading at the Fluvarium, I embarked on another kind of meaning-making, and underwent a comprehensive autism screening. The exhausting series of questionnaires and interviews designed to assess my communication and social skills culminated in a meeting, via video, with the clinician I'd been seeing for several months. "Well, I don't think there's anything in here that's going to surprise you," she said, and we both laughed. She was partly right. I wasn't surprised that my scores in each area were consistent with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder; I'd been expecting that outcome from the start. What did surprise me, though, was the degree to which I exceeded the threshold in each of the tests the clinician had administered. For one assessment tool, the threshold score was 26; 36 was the average for autistic adults, and my score was 45. For another, the cut-off score was 65; I scored 157. The scores of each assessment tool were accompanied by a short, written summary; one summary read, "Andreae's total score, which fell in the severe range, indicated she may have difficulties in reciprocal social behaviour [which are] considered clinically significant and may

lead to interference in everyday social experiences . . . In social awareness, and social communication, she was rated as moderate. In social motivation, social cognition, and restricted interests and repetitive behaviours, she rated as severe" (O'Dea). Later, when I relayed my results to friends, I joked that not only had I "passed" my screening tests, but that I'd gotten an A-plus in autism.

My stellar performance on the autism exams was hard won; waitlists are long, and clinical screenings are expensive. My earliest forays into self-guided autism research (I am, after all, an academic with access to all the usual medical journals) had presented me with a figure of the "patient" who bore little resemblance to me, nor to the autistic people I had gotten to know in real life. Like the bulbous bumblebee who shouldn't be able to fly on its disproportionately tiny wings, I shouldn't be able to read or write poetry; according to the research I was feverishly reading, underlining, and annotating (with colourful, hilarious profanity—figurative language at its finest), autistic people don't "get" literature. Some articles boldly declared that autistic people are unable to read at all because they lack the skills to decode. Some argued that even when autistic people *appeared* to read, they were merely engaging in mimicry and didn't really understand the content of what they were reading. Still other theories suggested that even if autistic people can read and comprehend the semantic relationships of the words on a page, they can't penetrate the *true meaning* of literary texts because of their incapacity to engage with language beyond the literal level.

A foundational figure in autism research is Francesca Happé; in a frequently cited 1995 article called "Understanding Minds and Metaphors: Insights from the Study of Figurative Language in Autism," Happé writes of the autistic adult:

> Though now too old to be expected to play pretend games, the same imagination problems are evident in his or her inability to follow the plots of soap operas and in a preference for learning lists of train times over reading books with fictional contents. Communication impairment persists in able adults with autism in the face of apparently good language (grammar and phonology). Despite a perhaps enormous and erudite vocabulary, conversation is impossibly stilted, pedantic, and overformal: Humor, irony, and figurative language all remain a mystery. (276)

Everything about this passage is bizarre. Why is a person's ability to follow soap opera plots, of all things, of concern to science? Why is a preference for reading train timetables over fiction considered a "problem," rather than something quite practical? After all, no matter how enjoyable a novel might be, it's not going to get you to your appointments on time, is it? Is the *meaning* of a novel a *more meaningful meaning* than that of a train schedule? Who decides? Happé's data about autistic communication style isn't totally off the wall; I'll plead guilty to all charges of "enormous and erudite vocabulary," and, to be fair, my conversation could by some people's standards, be read as "pedantic and overformal." It's Happé's interpretation of this data, and her pathologization of preferences as "communication impairment" that give me pause. Happé's position elicits two responses from me: first, that she is incorrect in her claim that autistic people can't possibly follow soap opera plots and never read fiction, and second, if her claim *were* correct, then so what? Happé's indictment of the autistic adult reverberates in the closing line: "Humor, irony, and figurative language all remain a mystery." A mystery to whom?[1] Leo Kanner, one of the so-called "fathers" of autism diagnosis, reported in extensive detail the figurative

[1] Stand-up comic Joe Wells attributes the stereotype of autistic people having no sense of humour to Hans Asperger; in an excerpt from a stand-up set posted to Instagram, Wells delivers a bit about how Asperger "worked for the German government in the 1930s and 40s… in Germany… for the government […] All I'm saying is maybe we didn't think it was appropriate to laugh at *his* jokes" (Wells online).

utterances of his child patients, and reported on the joy they took in saying them ("Irrelevant and Metaphorical Language"). Hans Asperger, his continental counterpart who, in essence, "discovered" autism in Europe while Kanner was doing the same in America, reported the same findings (Asperger). In suggesting that autistic people have no understanding of humour, irony, or figurative language, Happé seems to reveal instead her own failure to understand *autistic* humour, irony, and figurative language. Our mode of communication remains a mystery *to her.* I file Happé's statement right next to Sigmund Freud's confession that despite his "thirty years of research into the feminine soul," he's never been able to answer the question "what does a woman want?" (E. Jones 421). Instead of observing autistic people and deciding what they do and don't *get,* how about just asking them?

Elements, simultaneity: poetry as autistic language

The cliché of autistic literality has become pervasive due to research by prominent figures like Happé; as M. Remi Yergeau states so succinctly, "[i]t is not uncommon … for clinicians to sensationalize their autistic clients' literalisms" with the expectation that non-autistic readers "will find the stories exotic or intriguing or just plain weird" (59). Yergeau does not suggest that the literal reading of figurative language is *not* part of autistic rhetoricity; it certainly is: to me, one of the great strengths of autistic cognitive and linguistic difference is the capacity to interpret language in the literal *and* figurative levels more or less at the same time. Happé's article on autistic literality opens with the sentence, "Interacting with a bright and verbal autistic child can be an eye-opening experience: One discovers one is talking in metaphors!" (275). I would argue that, for many autistic people, it doesn't take a regime of clinical research to learn that our day-to-day language is heavily figurative; we've known it from the start, and it has taken us great

conscious effort to learn which sense of any word is appropriate in which context. Happé presumes "all earnestness" in her "bright and verbal child" subjects' responses to her figurative requests—*"stick your coat down over there* is met by a serious request for glue … ask her to read a passage *out loud* and she will obligingly shout through to the end of it"—but we have only Happé's word to go on. How do we know the children aren't exhibiting a form of humour to which the clinician is simply not attuned? I can easily imagine my own children, with characteristic deadpan delivery, reacting as Happé's subjects do; in our house, responding to figurative language as though we believe it to be literal is the highest form of comedy.

Six years after Happé's article was published, a study by Abigail Werth et al. examined "[v]erbal humour in a woman with high-functioning autism." The subject was a 29-year-old woman named Grace, whose habitual use of "puns, jokes, neologisms, 'portmanteau' words, irreverent humour, irony, sarcasm, and word play" were examined "in relation to current theories of autism and *normal* humour" (111; emphasis mine). The researchers relay examples of Grace's humour and categorize them according to a rubric of their own creation; they consider teasing more "sophisticated" than puns or wordplay, and they deem humour meant to be shared with a non-autistic listener more advanced than humour meant to be shared with Grace's autistic friends (which is itself seen as more advanced than the humorous comments Grace makes for her own benefit). For reasons the researchers don't explain, jokes and wordplay pertaining to Grace's "obsessional interests" (known as "specializations," "special interests," or "spins" in the autistic community) aren't deemed as "successful" as humour that caters to the interests of others. Grace's "facility with puns and double meanings" is deemed remarkable; the researchers claim that this skill "suggests that at some time in the past she learned the 'trick' of switching meaning, and has capitalized on this ability with a high degree of success" (121). In characterizing Grace's acuity with double meaning as a "trick" she's picked up and learned to exploit, the researchers

reduce their subject's talent to mere mimicry, and dismiss a form of discourse shared by many autistic people—wordplay—as instrumental rather than expressive and communicative.

The title of Werth et al.'s paper comes from one of Grace's figurative utterances; when showing a visitor around the community where she lives, Grace points out the nearby weaving centre and says, "Here's the weavery looming up" (115). Werth et al. may consider this one of Grace's less-sophisticated humorous constructions, but I've been laughing about it ever since I first read the article (several years ago, at this point). Grace communicates in "[p]uns, jokes, neologisms, 'portmanteau' words, irreverent humour, irony, sarcasm, and word play," and so do I; so, too, do the poets whose work I find the most intriguing, accomplished, and delightful.

The double meanings that populate poetry—whether humorous or utterly grave—work on the same foundations as any of Grace's "unsophisticated" utterances. When metaphor is successful in poetry, it is precisely because we *are* aware of it. Figurative language like Happé's *stick your coat down over there* isn't a particularly successful figuration; "stick" works on the figurative level only, because adhering outerwear to furniture isn't something we would ever conceivably do. Pointing this out—that is, highlighting the ineptness of the metaphor by exposing its absurdity—is where the humour lies. Happé doesn't get it because she's operating on a figurative level that has no literal correspondence. Her subjects are letting her know that she's using a bad metaphor, and Happé doesn't even notice.

Figurative language is not a "mystery" to me; as an autistic person and as a poet, the "both/and" of figurative language is my natural dwelling place. Theorist Kristina Chew argues that not only are autistic people able to engage meaningfully with the creative arts in general, but that poetry in particular bears intriguing similarities to language formulations common to autistic individuals; Chew breaks down her autistic son's language use to reveal that it is highly figurative, but that the figuration is idiosyncratic, with correspondences evident only to those

intimately familiar with the speaker ("Fractioned Idiom"). Chris Martin describes the "remarkable reciprocity poetry shares with autism or autistic minds or autistic ways of moving through the world." He asks:

> Is it the way patterns—rhyme, line count, meter—so crucially embed themselves into the visual and sonic frameworks of each poem? Do the poem's formal elements—line breaks, stanzas, repetitions—delineate a space where creative decisions are more readily perceived and undertaken? Is there an almost architectural element to building poems that lets autistic writers inhabit their particular ways of making language? Does the hand of the poem open to the writer (and reader) in a way that leaves space for the breadth and depth of autistic intensity? (3)

Like poetry, autistic language is often imaginative, idiosyncratic, and novel, but also logically ordered and consistent with its own internal rules. Like autistic experience in the world, poetry can be explosive and unbounded, challenging every agreed-upon convention.

For a person to be considered autistic, their social, cognitive, sensory, and communicative capacities have to fall far enough outside a medical median that the person is deemed "impaired." I meet and exceed this threshold for impairment. But the fields in which I excel—creative writing and literary scholarship—are fields that require social, cognitive, sensory, and communicative acuity. As a poet, my penchant for rhyme, repetition, and syntactic fragmentation are valued and rewarded. For autistic people, these same tools of language are dismissed as involuntary tics, communication failures, and, in the words of Leo Kanner, "irrelevant utterances" (242). To my mind, there is a conspicuous overlap between, on one hand, what we call "poetic devices" and, on the other, the traits common to autistic communication. Poetry's sonic and rhythmic patterning (including repetition, which is functionally indistinguishable from autistic echolalia) object fixation (that is, *symbolism)*, derivation of meaning from structure, and surprising syntactic

choices are strikingly consistent with diagnostic criteria for autism as per the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic guide, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* or *DSM*. The patterns I observe as a reader, and the call-backs and references I am able to access by having a memory that favours details over contexts, are the same patterns and intra/intertextual webs that result in a comment of "doesn't see the forest for the trees" in a clinical report. Viewed through the lens of autism pathology, poetry comes very close to meeting Kanner's criteria for "irrelevant utterances.[2]" In a clinical setting, it could be argued that rhyming indicates a fixation on non-semantic sounds rather than on semantic meaning; that arranging words into lines of arbitrary length, with predetermined patterns of unstressed and stressed syllables demonstrates obsessive ritualistic behaviour; that repeating a rhythmic line aloud outside of its appropriate communicative context is a form of meaningless utterance, a vocal stereotypy; that the voice one uses to read poetry out loud demonstrates what autism researchers and diagnosticians refer to as a "flat vocal affect" (Stagg et al. 704). There are entire poetic forms where a new poem is made up from lines extracted from other poets' work and augmented, recontextualized, and reordered; is this all that different from what clinicians call *echolalia*?

Put differently: poetry does not merely speak autistic people's language, but in many ways *is* autistic language (Baron 103).[3] If autistic people use these syntactic tools and

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[2] Kanner is careful to distinguish between autistic and poetic uses of language; he writes that autistic expressions, "instead of relying on accepted or acceptable substitutions as encountered in poetry and conversational phraseology, are rooted in *concrete, specific, personal* experiences of the child who uses them. So long as the listener has no access to the original source, the meaning of the metaphor must remain obscure to him, and the child's remark is not 'relevant' to any sort of verbal or other situational interchange" (243). Kanner does concede that the English language is replete with obscure metaphorical correspondences – he writes, "An ulster is a certain type of topcoat whether or not you connect it with the county in Ireland from which it has its name" (244). For Kanner, these social agreements about metaphorical language use are what separates the autist from everyone else: "The autistic child does not depend on … prearranged semantic transfers. He makes up his own as he goes along" (244).

[3] This is not to suggest that all autistic people are poets, nor that all poets are autistic; such an assertion would be ludicrous. Rather, I echo Kristina Chew's call to apply to autistic expression the same modes of interpretation we apply to poetry; so similar are the modes of communication that one could, Chew suggests, glean meaning from otherwise gnomic autistic conversation by using prosody as a sort of translation tool. (I use "prosody" here in the literary sense, meaning the study of the tools and techniques of poetic versification. In the context of autism,

formulations common to poetry in their (that is, *our)* self-expression, it follows that literary works that favour these same tools and formulations should be familiar, pleasing, and compelling to autistic readers. Research demonstrates that autistic poets draw on our unique cognitive style in our work—that is, that our poetry differs from the poetry of non-autistic people in ways that are directly attributable to the poets' autism; this has been suggested both of amateur poets who write primarily for therapeutic purposes and of respected poets who have made notable contributions to the genre.[4] I argue that the neurological traits that influence autistic writers' mode of expression must also influence readers' modes of textual engagement.

Engaging the autistic mode

So far, I've avoided offering a definition of autism, largely because the question "what is autism" is, like the question "what is poetry": far easier asked than answered. As an autistic person, everything I know and feel is mediated by this *thing* I call autism; being asked to define it is like being asked to define air. But, to return to the words of Chris Martin above, I didn't always have the word "autism" to attach to the *thing* that made me experience the world differently than other people. For a long time, I attributed that difference to something I came to think of as "living in a state of poetry." In this state, nothing is unworthy of notice; a fallen leaf is as expansive and as awe-inspiring as an entire forest. The sounds, patterns, degrees and movements of light, the scents, textures, tastes, the sensations of the passing of time, the relative lightness or heaviness of things: these are all experienced with a frequency and an intensity to which most people are immune. "Frequency and intensity" is an apt phrase, and one I've adopted from climate change

"prosody" is typically used in the language acquisition sense, signifying the changes in pitch and tempo in spoken language which autistic people often struggle to decode and replicate.)

[4] See Hermelin and Roth for discussions of amateur autistic poets, and Fitzgerald, Baron, Brown, and Tammet for analysis of high-profile autistic poets.

discourse. When people in Newfoundland, where I live, deny climate change, they argue that "we've always had hurricanes" and "we've always had snowstorms," and, sure enough, they'll have examples to prove that this is so. Those of us who know climate change to be real reply that yes, we've always had storms, but the frequency and intensity of the storms are new. This is what being alert to the poetry of everyday life is like: you just notice more, feel more, make more connections between things, ask more questions about them. And this is what autism is like, too: we autistics experience the same tempests of overwhelm and, if we're allowed to, of joy that everyone else does, but with a frequency and intensity that far exceed the norm.

I have described living in a state of poetry—a state of autism—as evoking a sense of connectivity, as though the world is overlaid with patterns of light and sound, and as though apparently disparate items and sensations were tied to one another by thread. I'm not the only one who views autism this way. In a 2018 essay called "Autism as a Mode of Engagement," Elizabeth Fein describes autism as:

> a thing that happens between sensing bodies and sensuous worlds, in the particularity of each. I have come to think of the thing I seek out as a *mode of engagement with the stuff of the world* – a way of *being with* one's surroundings. In particular, it is a form of permeability, of deep existential vulnerability, to the order of things around us: structured systems, elements in their robust relations, arrangements both deliberate and disavowed.
>
> (130)

As with my experience of autism, Fein's definition is a radical departure from the one which snakes through the opening paragraph of every biomedical and psychiatric article on ASD. Clinical definitions classify ASD as a pervasive "spectrum disorder" marked by impaired social

and communication abilities. The term "spectrum disorder" indicates (quite correctly) that autism manifests differently from one autistic subject to another; however, despite these variations, the so-called "core symptoms" of ASD—social and communicative impairments—must be present at clinically measurable levels in order to constitute a diagnosis. I mentioned above that the word *autism* derives from the belief by early diagnosticians that autistic people are somehow locked inside the self, disconnected from the world around them (around *us*). That is, we are characterized by an unusual *self-ness.* Lay understandings of autism, echoing the prevalent psychiatric descriptions, evoke separateness, deferring to stereotypes of autistics as "[p]eople who seem to be trapped in their own bodies, and can't communicate with people. They just seem to live their lives in their own little world" (Huws and Jones 339). Fein's view of autism suggests the very opposite: for her, autism is defined by its *engagement with,* by its way of *being with;* the thing to which autism is permeable, though, is not the social world so much as the "stuff of the world" and the "order of things" that surround us.

If everyone seems to define autism differently, then how are any of us meant to understand and engage with it? This is one more thing that autism and poetry have in common, I suppose: a refusal to be taxonomically contained. Aside from the obviously hyperbolic classifications of autism as an epidemic and a public health crisis (it is neither, although many autistic people do end up in crisis situations due to insufficient support), there is the debate, such as it is, over whether autism should be considered a disorder. I'll take a moment to nitpick here: while the terms *Autism Spectrum Disorder* (ASD) and *autism* are frequently used interchangeably, they are not the same thing. *Autism Spectrum Disorder* is a diagnosis given to people who demonstrate, in a clinical setting, a set of impairments and behaviours consistent with the criteria for ASD as laid out in the *DSM*. The *DSM*, currently in its 5th edition (and thus

referred to as the *DSM-5*), has itself been identified by theorist Julia Miele Rodas as exhibiting "autism poetics." Rodas, in her 2018 study *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe,* argues that the *DSM*, like many of the people it seeks to categorize, is fixated to a byzantine degree on taxonomy (77). For a person to be diagnosed with ASD, they must meet the *DSM*'s criteria, which include such things as "[h]yper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment" ("Autism Spectrum Disorder"). As a diagnostic criterion, this is maddeningly vague. What does it mean to react *too much* ("hyperreactivity") or *too little* ("hyporeactivity") to sensory input? Is there a point at which the stopping to smell the blooming linden flowers on a July morning becomes pathological? If I emit a non-semantic sound of contentment in response to the low-slanting October sunlight as it casts dappled, moving leaf-shadows across my office floor, is that within or beyond the cut-off for an appropriate reaction? And what does it mean for someone to exhibit "Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus" ("Autism Spectrum Disorder)?[5]

Abounding, ebullient, effervescent emotion

One of the most nefarious effects of clinical autism research, and of the *DSM*, has been the pathologizing of autistic joy. Francesca Happé's constrained sense of humour keeps her (and by extension us, her readers) from registering the subtle expression of delight I imagine her subjects displaying as they chuckle inwardly at having made a grown-up doctor believe that they really

[5] To highlight the arbitrary nature of these thresholds: an organization called The Global and Regional Autism Spectrum Partnership (GRASP) cites "becoming an expert in seventeenth century art" as an example of how the *DSM*'s criterion might manifest in adults ("Autism Spectrum Info"). While seventeenth-century art is a fairly niche interest, becoming an expert in it hardly seems like a problem (unless, I suppose, the expertise is used for the purpose of forgery and/or art theft).

thought they were supposed to use glue to *stick their coat down over there.* By classifying Grace's wordplay as a "trick," her researchers drain her utterances of their meanings, and make Grace's delight in her constructions seem involuntary and accidental. The *DSM*'s insistence on "appropriate" levels of reaction to and interest in sensory aspects of the environment places constraints on fascination and exuberance. If one were to believe the medical and psychiatric research, one would have the impression that autism and joy are incompatible concepts. In my research for this thesis, I searched over and over for scholarly articles on autistic joy; the closest I came to finding any were not about autistic experiences of joy, but about *parents* of autistic children managing to find or recover joy in the face of their heartbreak and disappointment (Myers et al. 675). Joy is not *for* us; it is something for people to feel *in spite of* us. To be fair, joy in general isn't something to which much psychiatric attention has been given. Kay Redfield Jamison writes, in the opening pages of her 2005 book *Exuberance,* that people prone to experiences of overwhelming joy:

> have enjoyed the benign neglect of my field. Psychologists, for reasons of clinical necessities or vagaries of temperament, have chosen to dissect and catalogue the morbid conditions—depression, anger, anxiety—and to leave largely unexamined the more vital, positive ones … We have given sorrow many words, but a passion for life few. (3–4)

If the joys and passions of the average person have been deemed of no great value to science, then it hardly seems fair to expect any attention to be given to autistic experiences of joy.

And yet, one of the markers of autism is our exuberance, our overflow of enthusiasm when we encounter things we find pleasurable. This enthusiasm is built into the diagnostic criteria; when we become transfixed by spinning a shiny metal disk, when we chatter on and on about a favourite subject, when we find a garment we like and insist on wearing it every day until

it disintegrates, these joy behaviours are the very things that mark us as disabled. We like weird things, and we like them too much. Online, the hashtag #autisticjoy has emerged as a way for autistic people to express joy and to share our enthusiasm with other autistic people. The degree to which autistic people can enthuse about their interests has been misinterpreted as a lack of engagement with things *other people* find interesting; this misreading is present even in the screening tools for ASD, one of which asks the person being screened to agree or disagree with the statements "I only like to talk to people who share my special interests," and "I only like to think and talk about a few things that interest me" (Ritvo et al. 1084). For many autistic people—as is evident in the positive, excited, emoji-laden responses from autistic people to other autistic people who have posted about their autistic joy online—it is not the subject of a person's enthusiasm but *the level of enthusiasm itself* that connects autistic people when they discuss their interests.

To return to Redfield Jamison, "Exuberance is an abounding, ebullient, effervescent emotion. It is kinetic and unrestrained, joyful, irrepressible. It is not happiness, although they share a border. It is instead, at its core, a more restless, billowing state" (4). Exuberance is an excess, a surfeit, a too-much-ness. It is a lot. Exuberance might not have a place in Redfield Jamison's field of psychology, but it certainly has a place in literary studies. Literature has always had many goals: to instruct, to inspire, to bear witness, to challenge, to excite the passions, and to delight. Much of contemporary literary theory (perhaps taking a cue from psychology) tends to linger on the witnessing and challenging elements of literature, but it seems unlikely that any of us would spend much time reading if the things we read didn't delight us. Poetry, in particular, seems to be a mode uniquely able to elicit delight in a reader. The nursery rhymes that captivate us in early childhood prime us to find pleasure in meter, repetition, and fanciful language. But

how many people have had their delight in poetry extinguished by having a grade-school teacher ask, “What is happening in this poem?” and “What idea is the poet trying to get across?” Suddenly, the effervescent pleasure of how a poem sounds and moves is not the thing we’re supposed to focus on; we’re dragged out of the transcendent pleasures of sensation and jarred back into classroom concerns of “right” and “wrong” interpretations. We are asked “What does the poem mean?” but we are not let in on the secret that poems *mean* differently than other forms of writing do.

My guiding principle in choosing poets on whom to focus my particular and peculiar reading style is exuberance; the four I have selected write exuberantly and abundantly, and their work elicits an exuberant reaction in me as an autistic reader. Hopkins, Dickinson, Murray, and Carson are all writers whose output is prolific, encyclopedic, alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) playful and storm-tossed. Each is a poet who deploys all the formal tools that resonate with autistic modes of expression: concerted and conspicuous repetition of sounds and patterns; conscious wordplay, punning, and double meaning; neologism, multilingualism, etymology, idiom and idiolect; a coexisting reverence for form, and refusal to be contained/constrained by it. Getting up close to their poems has been like playing round after round of cognitive pinball, with all the lights and gears and flipping flippers such a thing demands. Allowing my sense of autistic joy to serve as a critical factor in my decision making around how to approach this research is more than just a way of making the enormous undertaking—a doctoral program—less arduous (although it certainly has done that). It is a political position that claims autistic joy, pleasure, exuberance, and delight as a rejection of the conventional position that these things can only be felt *in spite of* autism. I move that the

particular pleasure I take in the poetry I love is not in spite of my being autistic, nor is it coincidental to my autism, but rather *because* I am autistic.

The differences in cognition, communication, and sensory processing that characterize autistic experience result in what I have come to refer to as a *particular and peculiar autistic reading style.* This mode of engagement not only makes allowances for the ways in which autism mediates reading experience, but indeed privileges autistic cognition as a way of uncovering connections and patterns both within a text and between that text and the many texts and textures of the world around us. I will introduce this reading style in detail in the next chapter; once I have established that such a reading style exists, I will then deploy that style, offering *particular and peculiar* readings of texts by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Les Murray, and Anne Carson. My proposed theory of this autistic reading style, while representing only one of many possible forms of autistic engagement with text, establishes a jumping-off point for future inquiry into autistic approaches to pleasure-reading; it also offers a humanistic, critical autism studies perspective, which will serve to balance medical-model research that has tended to focus only on the experiences of autistic individuals who struggle to read, ignoring those who have struggled to read *in the way that is expected* (or even demanded) by peers, parents, and educators.

Chapter breakdown

As I approach the end of this introduction, let me provide a preview of what's to come. In **Chapter One**, I lay out my definitions and methodology, and I assess some of the critical texts that have informed my approach to the material. I introduce some key concepts—neuroqueerness, neurocosmopolitanism—and attempt to explain, to a (presumed) non-autistic audience, the ways in which autistic experience of reading differs from its allistic equivalent. I also complicate the

rationale behind my choice of poets to examine by positioning each of them against a cultural narrative of autistic language usage, neuroqueer literacy, and atypical engagement with the "stuff" of the world.

In **Chapter Two**, I examine the life and poetry of English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). Hopkins was a polymath, a polyglot, and a convert not just to Catholicism, but specifically to the (at that time) persecuted Society of Jesus (the Jesuits): a priestly order concerned with asceticism, meditation, and education. Hopkins lived with overlapping chronic physical and mental health conditions, and while critics have acknowledged this biographical fact, they have not necessarily read the poet's work through a critical disability studies lens; doing so allows for readings that diverge from—and potentially disrupt—canonical interpretations of the texts. The esoteric, spiritual nature of Hopkins' writing, along with the poet's highly idiosyncratic poetic style, has prompted critics to interpret the poems as highly figurative, at the expense (in my view) of other, more compelling readings. I offer a "particular and peculiar" reading of Hopkins's sonnet "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," setting aside the canonical interpretation and making new bottom-up meaning that considers Hopkins's disabilities and his interests.

Chapter Three focuses on American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886); like Hopkins, Dickinson wrote in a highly idiosyncratic style that was out of step with the dominant creative mode of her time. She shared with Hopkins a fascination with—and impressive understanding of—the science of the day, as well as an attraction to spiritual matters. Both poets were all but unpublished in their lifetimes, but while Hopkins actively (if inconsistently) pursued publication, Dickinson's feelings vis-à-vis the prospect of an audience are less clearly understood. Using Dickinson's letters and what is known of her reading and writing habits (the books and

magazines she enjoyed; the materials she used as writing paper; the way her poems were both distributed to and withheld from her coterie of readers), I question the characterization of Dickinson as childlike and timid, and evaluate her writing output not as 1800-odd discrete poems but as one unified epistemological project.

In **Chapter Four** I move to the twentieth century with Australian poet Les Murray (1938-2019). Murray, too, was a polymath and a polyglot—largely self-taught. Unlike Hopkins and Dickinson, Murray published prolifically, and was a very public and often outspoken figure in his home country. Murray was the father of an autistic son, and came to identify as autistic in middle age. He was open about his experiences with depression, publishing a memoir on the subject called *Killing the Black Dog* in 2009. My interest in Murray is not so much to do with our shared diagnoses as it is to do with our shared love of idiom; Murray excelled at translation, and this facility with moving between languages—human languages, animal languages, the visual languages of the Australian landscape—is the focus of my inquiry.

Finally, in **Chapter Five** I offer a reading of the 1992 collection *Short Talks* by Canadian poet Anne Carson (1950-). Carson has the distinction of being the only living poet I engage with here (and I certainly hope that her inclusion in this foursome doesn't act as any kind of jinx); she also has the distinction of being presumed autistic by many readers, despite only every having obliquely referred to herself as such. Her poem "Short Talk on Autism" is read by theorist Kristina Chew as an accurate and sensitive portrayal of autism; I go further and posit that *Short Talks* as a collection is an autistic text in both form and content.

My **Conclusion** chapter is a space of synthesis and reflection. In it, I reveal some of the patterns that emerged during my research which connect Hopkins, Dickinson, Murray, and Carson in an interesting and, I believe, heretofore unnoticed way. I offer my thoughts on the role

and responsibility of the autistic researcher in critical autism studies, and I share some of the techniques and practices I adopted to pursue this research and writing project while also protecting my own emotional and intellectual wellbeing.

My approach in each of these chapters varies: I examine one Hopkins poem and one Carson collection, three Murray collections and the entire poetic output of Dickinson. In the chapters on Hopkins and Dickinson, I draw heavily on the poets' historical moments and try to understand them as they would have understood themselves, in their own contexts. With Murray, I allow myself to fully engage with the poet as autistic subject; his self-identification as autistic opens him up to analysis as an autistic writer producing autistic poetry without any further qualifications necessary. My evaluation of Anne Carson in relation to autism is more complicated, and focuses less on what Carson has said about herself (which is little, as she is notoriously interview-averse), and more on what others, for better or worse, have said about her. In each chapter, I engage with the poets and their work in the way that is natural (and arguably inevitable) for me: as *stuff of the world.*

Chapter 1: Particular and Peculiar: Reading Autistically

> Adam: How is it that you can see us but nobody else can?
>
> Lydia: Well, I read through that *Handbook For The Recently Deceased.* It says, "Live people ignore the strange and unusual." I, myself, *am* strange and unusual.
>
> Barbara: You look like a regular girl to me.
>
> —*Beetlejuice,* dir. Tim Burton

In my introduction, I outlined my project and defined my place in it as an autistic researcher. I offered my rationale for including the poets I've chosen to include—Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Les Murray, and Anne Carson—and I gestured to the existence of an autistic reading style which I described as "particular and peculiar," and which I promised I would describe in detail here. In this chapter, I sit with the question, "what does it mean to read autistically?" I will also introduce some key concepts and terms, as well as some key texts that have informed my approach to this research.

I attempt here to illustrate the particular and peculiar possibilities of *my own* autistic way of reading. I take up this challenge cautiously, knowing well that, as Michael Bakan puts it, "the autism spectrum is profusely heterogeneous" (12), and that *my own* reading practice might not reflect that of another autistic reader, even though both our readings will have been influenced by our neurotypes. I hold the position that variations in human sensory and cognitive processing—variations we have come to refer to as "neurodiversity" or "neurodivergence"—*can't not* influence a neurodivergent reader's mode of engagement with a text. As an autistic person and a parent of autistic children, I find autistic language use endlessly exciting and beguiling. As a poet,

I recognize an overlap between autistic and poetic modes of language use: practices that include imaginative integration of idiom and idiolect, prominent use of rhythmic and metrical patterning, rich sensory detail, highly figurative expression, and meaningful repetition of specific words and phrases. Standing as I do with a foot in each of these worlds, I ask myself why poetry is lauded as a highly sophisticated form of self-expression while the utterances of autistic subjects are so often dismissed as irrelevant, inscrutable, and involuntary. Autism advocate Michael Baron identifies the similarity between poetic and autistic communication, and argues that "autism does not impair the imagination, but actually lends itself to particular forms of imagination, especially poetic expression" (103). Baron's position certainly resonates with my own experience.

I argue that if autistic language output (speech, but also typing, signing, spelling, and other forms of non-speaking autistic communication) is distinguished by these features, then autistic reading practices—that is, language *input*—will be marked by them as well. For this reason, I cheekily refer to an autistic mode of reading as *particular and peculiar.* It is particular in the sense that it is unique to each reader and in the sense of being especially attentive to detail. It is peculiar in that, like most autistic ways of doing things, it may seem unusual or "weird." Autistic reading practices are mediated by a reader's personal catalogue of idiosyncratic figurative correspondences, by gnomic intertextual interventions that emerge from autistic "encyclopedic" knowledge, by atypical sensory input processing, and by a tendency to privilege sonic effect over semantic meaning. Autistic people are known for having "enhanced perceptual functioning" (Lyons 775), "sensory distortions in the perception of physical objects" (R. Jones 113), and a "detail-oriented cognitive style" (Valla and Belmonte 371) that makes us unable to see the aforementioned proverbial forest for the aforementioned proverbial trees. Much has been made of this mode of cognition; it has been deemed responsible for autistic failure (too distracted by minutiae to pick up on valuable social cues) and for autistic success (being prodigiously

creative, for example, or having excellent mnemonic recall). Detail-oriented cognitive style and heightened sensitivity to sensory input are implicated in a mode of information processing known as "bottom-up thinking." Samantha Craft writes that while a non-autistic person might experience phenomena around them by "taking in the concept before the details"—something they are able to do in part because they share in a set of cultural preconceptions and collective memories—"the autistic mind, due to a bombardment of sensory clues, is taking in the *details* before the *concept*." Craft considers this details-first-concept-later approach "indispensable to innovative thinking" ("Bottoms-Up"). What Craft describes is an inductive mode of information processing. Autistic people are certainly not the only people who process information this way, and I can't assume that *all* autistic people rely on inductive rather than deductive thinking to make sense of the world, but it is certainly prevalent among us. It is not that bottom-up thinkers approach an experience without a priori knowledge, but rather that they do not call on their a priori knowledge until after they have thoroughly examined the details at hand. The process goes, more or less: 1) analyze details, 2) build a concept based on these details, 3) connect new concepts with previously collected ones. As philosopher Erin Manning suggests, in autistic perception there is "no hierarchical differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and nonhuman, between what connects to the body and what connects to the world" (14). Poet Jan Zwicky writes that "[t]he experience of understanding something is always the experience of a gestalt—the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or reperception of a whole" (2), but for people with bottom-up thinking processes this is not necessarily so. Or, perhaps, I just understand *understanding* differently; if I had to wait for a perception of a whole to emerge, I wouldn't understand much at all.

I began this chapter with an epigraph from the 1988 Tim Burton film *Beetlejuice,* a text which examines the borders between the normal and the weird. In the film, recently deceased

couple Adam and Barbara Maitland (Alex Baldwin and Geena Davis) haunt their charming small-town home in an effort to remove its ambitious and destructive new owners, the Deetzes. Delia Deetz (Catherine O'Hara) is a sculptor who specializes in jagged, insect-like pieces, and whose home décor aesthetic suggests a not-so-subtle German expressionist influence. Her teenage daughter, Lydia (Winona Ryder), has dark circles under her eyes, pallid skin, black bangs gelled into a stalactite formation, and an all-black wardrobe; contra Barbara, Lydia doesn't "look like a regular girl," but in fact looks much more like a ghost than do the khakis-and-florals ghost couple (whose decorating choices are summed up in Delia's friend Otho's sigh of disdain: "Ugh, deliver me from L.L. Bean"). In *Beetlejuice,* the normal is weird, and the weird is normal. In the scene from which the epigraph is taken, Lydia encounters the Maitlands for the first time. Barbara and Adam are trying to attract the Deetzes' attention by draping themselves in sheets and making "wooooo-oooooo" noises; that is, they are trying to mask themselves as "normal" ghosts. Their attempts fail; ghostliness is a weird state, and, as *The Handbook for the Recently Deceased* states, the living do tend to ignore the strange and unusual. Lydia, being strange and unusual—that is, *particular and peculiar*—is immune to this weird erasure.

The scene between Adam, Barbara, and Lydia provides a filmic, comic illustration of one of the concepts that underpins Julia Miele Rodas's observations on autistic language usage. Rodas identifies a power imbalance between autistic speakers (or non-speaking users of language) and their non-autistic listeners, writing that "in conventional audiences, there is a resistance to hearing and an insistence on prefigured forms and expressions that further disempower already marginalized subjects" (31). In *Beetlejuice,* the living (that is, the "normal") only see and hear that which they can already understand and categorize. In Rodas's estimation, the "conventional" audience resists "[e]ccentric, idiosyncratic, irregular, and challenging language," if not by ignoring it outright then by shoehorning it into established categories. "There

is a sense that meaning must be unlocked, a need … to believe in a transparent language and associated identity beyond the seemingly inscrutable autistic self," Rodas writes (31). Whatever the autistic person says, the "conventional audience" takes the position that they must have meant something else. M. Remi Yergeau, in their 2018 book *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness,* takes this even further, suggesting that when autistic communication harnesses the non-verbal—the moments and movements "in which persuadability inheres, in which motions and commotions send awkward electricity via spinal waves, felt across every interlocutor in a given room"—the autistic person's efforts at communication "are dismissed as arhetorical, as the involuntary blips of autistic brains sending autistic signals, all to the effect of allistic disgust, allistic pity, allistic fear" (39). Far from ignoring the "strange and unusual," the conventional audience in Yergeau's estimation sees in autistic utterances a sort of Kristevan abjection, and they are repulsed by it.

This conventional position that Rodas and Yergeau describe is consistent with the medical model (or "pathology paradigm") of autism, which perceives autism as a condition marked by communication deficits. Indeed, the first diagnostic criterion of Autism Spectrum Disorder, as per the *DSM-5* is "Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts." This perspective has been challenged by a number of scholars, among whom autistic researcher Damian Milton is perhaps the most prominent. Milton coined the term "the double empathy problem" to suggest that the failure of autistic people to intuit and anticipate the thoughts and motivations of non-autistic clinicians and peers is matched by the failure of non-autistic clinicians and peers to intuit the thoughts and motivations of autistic people (Milton). Dominant theories of autism like the "theory of mind" hypothesis developed by researcher Simon Baron-Cohen suggest that autistic people are impaired by their inability to read what other people are thinking (Baron-Cohen et al.). Milton points out that non-autistic people can't read what

people are thinking, either[1], and that they are particularly inept at imagining the mental goings-on of autistics. He writes, in a 2012 paper, that:

> it is true that autistic people often lack insight about non-AS[2] perceptions and culture, yet it is equally the case that non-AS people lack insight into the minds and culture of 'autistic people', or that they may lack social insight in other social situations due to an easily repaired natural attitude, and the aligning tendencies of their peers. (886)

Autistic people may struggle to pick up what allistics are laying down, but the inverse is also true. Milton goes on to suggest that, if anything, allistic people are *worse* at intuiting thoughts and motivations of autistic people than the inverse, because there is no societal pressure for non-autistic people to behave according to autistic standards and expectations; autistic people are forced to learn more about allistics than allistics are about autistics.

More recent research by Catherine Crompton et al. has demonstrated this principle in a clinical environment: in an experiment designed to evaluate whether the "communication deficit" theory holds up, Crompton and her team evaluated the aptitude of three groups to transfer information along a verbal chain. One group was composed entirely of autistic people, another group was entirely made up of allistic subjects, and a third group combined equal numbers of the two. The data collected by the researchers suggested that:

[1] I would take this one step further and suggest that *nobody* is able to read what anybody else is thinking; if ordinary people were adept at reading minds, then *mind-reader* and *psychic* wouldn't exist as categories of human.
[2] Asperger's Syndrome. When Milton's article was published, Asperger's Syndrome was still an accepted and distinct diagnosis in the *DSM*. Individuals who meet the diagnostic criteria for Asperger's are now diagnosed with ASD, and the term Asperger's has fallen out of favour in the autism community.

> autistic and nonautistic people do not significantly differ in how accurately they recall information from peers of the same neurotype but that selective difficulties occur when autistic and nonautistic people are sharing information. (1709)

In the experiment, a short "surreal" narrative was relayed from one participant to the next; the story was "designed to be difficult to predict, and did not include any inherently social aspects" (1707). The researchers measured two outcomes: the accuracy of the retold story, which indicated the level of verbal communication from one participant to the next, and the "rapport" felt between participants in each group, which indicated levels of non-verbal and extratextual communication between each speaker-listener pair.[3] Crompton et al.'s findings are significant because they, like Milton's "double empathy problem," reconfigure autistic communication styles as simply different than the allistic norm, rather than as a deficit. Autistic people communicate among themselves just fine; it's the involvement of allistics (the Francesca Happés, the Simon Baron-Cohens) that messes things up for us.

Autistic people are, by definition, unlike allistic people; we experience the world's sensory output differently, we interpret language and gesture differently, we *use* language and gesture differently. Of course, autistics are not the only people for whom this is true: poetry relies on novel and surprising use of language, and the close textual reading of poetry (or of any writing) can only occur if the reader is attuned to the text's details in an immersive way. The difference is that for autistic people, this difference is delineated by, and measurable against, a series of diagnostic questionnaires. As I explored in my introduction, one of the diagnostic criteria for *Autism Spectrum Disorder* is that we have "unusual" interests; that is, the things that

[3] On this second question, Crompton et al. found that rapport between the members of the mixed group was significantly lower than that in either of the other two groups, where group members tended to get along well and to enjoy working together.

are of great interest to allistic people tend to be of little interest to us, while the things that *do* interest us are seldom of interest to our allistic peers. Like Lydia Deetz*,* autistics are able to observe and interact with the "strange and unusual" because we are, ourselves, by most metrics, strange and unusual (even though we may not immediately appear to be so). Statements like "Others consider me odd or different," *"I have to 'act normal'* to please people and make them like me," and "I get along with other people by following a specific set of rules that *help me look normal,"* with their accompanying Likert scales,[4] are included in the Ritvo Autism-Asperger's Diagnostic Scale – Revised (or RAADS-R) diagnostic tool (Ritvo et al. 1084–1087; emphasis mine). As Aimée Morrison writes, "one of the diagnostic criteria of autism is the idea that *other people find me weird,* as based on observational reports" (695). Whatever negative designation "weird" might have among the mainstream, it is a nearly inevitable marker for autistics, and one many of us eventually come to embrace.

Incredibly close: reading differently

One of my formative experiences in critical reading of poetry came in an undergraduate Shakespeare course; in our first week of the semester, we were each assigned a line from *As You Like It* and sent off to the library to find the *Oxford English Dictionary* (on the actual shelves; the online *OED* wouldn't appear for another decade or so). We were instructed to look up every word in the line we'd been given, to consider each meaning that would have been current in the late sixteenth century, and then to carry on as though Shakespeare meant all these things, all the time. Double-, triple-, quadruple-entendres; we had to find them all. I approached the assignment with

[4] Likert scales are scales that measure degrees of agreement with a statement; the RAADS-R questionnaire offers possible responses of "True now and when I was young," "True only now," "True only when I was younger than 16," and "Never true."

the enthusiasm of a plucky amateur sleuth. It was a much-appreciated opportunity to truly immerse myself in the thing I loved best: a style of reading which left no semantic or sonic stone unturned. It was permission to get up close to language and stare at it. I fell so deeply in love with the *OED* that I could have climbed into it and lived out the rest of my days among its many pages.[5]

For someone with a highly detail-oriented cognitive style, this close reading model can be highly rewarding; for me, the more granular the detail, the more pleasurable the reading experience. The inclusion of "I focus on details rather than the overall idea" and "People tell me that I give too much detail" among the four-page list of statements in Ritvo's diagnostic scale suggests that autism is marked by a person both taking in and giving out an (over-)abundance of information. This relationship to detail creates the conditions for autistic people to become excellent (if perhaps overly excitable and occasionally pedantic) close readers, not just of literature, but of any text available. Like many autistic people, I was hyperlexic in childhood; that is, I read early and at a far more advanced level than most of my peers. For hyperlexic children, sonic and visual engagement with words precedes semantic understanding, sometimes by years (Craig and Telfer 364); by the time a reader learns what a word means, they have already developed an idiosyncratic "meaning" associated with the word that may have nothing to do with that word's "real" definition. For many children (and adults), this non-semantic engagement with language is a source of pleasure and even, to use autistic terminology, a form of "stimming." Stimming, from the medical term *self-stimulating action*, refers to what the *DSM-5* calls

[5] Indeed, one of the first things I did when I started grad school, many years later, was buy a *Compact OED* on eBay, with the original magnifying glass in the little drawer. Without the magnifying glass, you have to get very, very close indeed to the book to try and read it; even with the magnifying glass, an intimate physical closeness is demanded. Looking something up in the *Compact OED* is a deeply sensory process, and profoundly engaging.

"stereotyped movements." While stimming takes many forms[6] it is very often rhythmic in nature, sometimes serving to help the autistic person self-regulate in reaction to sensory or emotional overwhelm (Kapp et al. 1782). For many autistic people, the sonic properties of words and syllables are "stimmy." Ralph John Savarese writes that, due to sensory sensitivities, autistic people tend to hear speech sounds with greater accuracy than do non-autistic people, and this enhanced sensory ability allows autistics, even those who do not communicate by speech, to collect and use words not primarily as semantic tools, but as acoustical playthings (*See It* 43). For autistic readers of poetry, then, poetry is a source not just of intellectual enrichment and emotional experience, but also of intense sensory pleasure.

Autistics read closely because we engage closely; to return to Elizabeth Fein, if autism is a "state of visible symbiosis with the products of creation" (132), then autistic readers must be deeply enmeshed with and entangled by the stuff—in this case the words and sounds—of the world. But what does "close" mean, and is there such a thing as too close? I have already mentioned that "detail-oriented cognitive style" is one of the hallmarks of autism; another hallmark—indeed one of the traits that serves as a "tell" for teachers trained to flag students for ASD screening—is a habit of getting "too close" to other people. Many autistic people, especially children, are "close talkers" who "get in other people's faces." It is not uncommon for autistic children, and some adults, to stroke other people's hair, to sniff people's skin, to pet people's clothes (indeed, many therapies for autistic children focus on suppressing these inclinations). If we struggle to recognize other people's personal space, it is not because we wish to be invasive, but because the boundaries between our bodies and the "stuff of the world" feel so permeable.

[6] Conspicuous "stims" can include rocking, arm-flapping, and repeated non-semantic sounds. Many autistic adults adopt more discreet stims, for example: hair twirling, pen-tapping, humming a repeated melodic line, tracing shapes with the eyes, nail- or lip- biting, or fiddling with jewellery.

Proprioception is the word for a person's sense of where their body is positioned in relation to other objects around it; many autistic people have impaired proprioception and navigate the physical world with some difficulty. We can be clumsy and awkward in the way we touch and handle material items. Primary school teachers are trained to look for students who tend to hold toys or other objects inches from their faces; this "inappropriate play" is another "symptom" of autism.

I have always tended to get too close to the objects I investigate. In art galleries and museums, I still have to fight the urge to lick paintings. I plan my walking routes through town in order to pass through parks and alleys where I am likely to encounter moss, and I take close-up videos of it (my phone is full of these videos, and I can't bring myself to delete them; they calm my nerves when I feel jangled). As a young adult, I often felt self-conscious in shops, and I worried that the way I handled the items for sale might look odd and, as such, suspect, to cashiers and floor staff (but so, too, might keeping my hands in my pockets—truly, an autist in a jewelry store can't win). I don't touch or sniff strangers' hair, but sometimes I very much want to. I can't help but think of this "inappropriate" autistic relationship to proximity in my assessment of my own reading style. I consider myself lucky that the things I love—texts—don't care how close I get to them. My autistic close reading is a too-close reading. It's lick-the-painting, bury-your-face-in-the-fuzzy-sweater close.

An autistic reading style may be "close," but it is not exactly "close reading" in the common critical sense. Autistic attentiveness to syntax and form at an up-close level is, to be sure, consistent with the close reading style associated with the New Criticism and its practitioners in the middle years of the twentieth century. Beyond this, however, the two modes are distinctly different. Close reading in the New Critical sense emerged as a way of privileging

the independence of a poetic text from both the poet's intentions in creating a poem and the reader's emotional reactions to it. Chief among close reading's principles were the excision of what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley termed "affective fallacy" ("confusion between the poem and its results," or interference of the reader's reaction in aesthetic interpretation) and "intentional fallacy" ("confusion between a poem and its origins" and purposes) (Siebers 46). Theorist Tobin Siebers explains in his 1988 volume *The Ethics of Criticism* that while affective fallacy has lost its place as a source of consternation for critics, having largely been done away with in the 1960s and 1970s by reader-response theory and its kin, concern over intentional fallacy "deserves to be called the defining feature of the New Criticism, and … has retained even today the force of a sacred taboo" (46). Siebers writes that from this "taboo" has come the "pervasive use of such terms as 'speaker,' 'narrator,' and 'persona'" to avoid sullying the poem with any details, inferences, or assumptions about the poet as a human agent. "Unfortunate is the uninitiated reader who dares to attribute a statement in a work to its author" (Siebers 47–8).

New Critical close reading is predicated on boundedness; the *what* of the poem is severed from the *who* existing on either side of it. As Deb Donig writes, in close reading, meaning is "constellated and produced internally, within the hermetically sealed boundaries of the text" (2023–4). Close reading, then, is in many ways a *closed* reading. The enclosure on which close reading is premised creates a distinction between poet, text, and reader that is quite counter to the enmeshed, entangled mode of engagement associated with autistic experience. Autistic reading style is fundamentally unconstrained; every word, every space, every pun, every reference a poet uses places the poem in a web of contexts. The autistic tendency to amass, retain, and catalogue vast amounts of information about the things that interest us means that any reading is bound to be an intertextual one. To return to Kristina Chew: autistic cognitive style is often metonymic ("Fractioned" 134), connecting ideas based on proximity rather than similarity; the result is a

highly idiosyncratic list of correspondences. It cannot exist, then, within the boundaries associated with close reading as it has been known.

There is a second way in which autistic reading is distinct from any other style of reading: autistic experience is disability experience, and disability experience means that disabled people both *know differently* and *know different things* than do non-disabled people. Disability theorist Leah Lakshmi Piepszna-Samarasinha attributes to disabled people "crip skills" and "crip science," and observes that "[a]ble-bodied people are shameless about really not getting it that disabled people could know things that the abled don't. That we have our own cultures and histories and skills. That there might be something that they could learn from us" (69). Piepszna-Samarasinha echoes bioethicist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson who, in a 2012 essay called "The Case for Conserving Disability," argues that disabled people possess "subjugated knowledge" which "might be understood as an asset rather than a liability, not just in terms of diversity or human rights categories, but as what might be called an advantageous minority skill set" (346n9).

In her essay, Garland-Thomson cites music theorist Joseph N. Straus, who proposes ways in which different modes of "disablist hearing"—including "blind hearing, deaf hearing, autistic hearing, and mobility inflected hearing"—might offer new, generative understandings of what music is and how it works on different listeners (347). For Garland-Thomson, Straus proposes "the experiential gestalt generated by living on the autistic spectrum as a source for a counter-eugenic," which she identifies as "neurodiversity" (a relatively new term at the time of Garland-Thomson's essay). In his 2011 book *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music,* Straus writes that:

> autistic hearing provides an alternative to normal hearing, which is undertaken in silence and oriented toward global coherence, the synthesis of wholes from parts, the creation of

> relationships among discrete events, the subsuming context, and the creation of conceptual hierarchies, particularly in the domain of pitch. (165)

For Straus, autistic listeners are particularly well suited to appreciating atonal music (166–7). That is: autistic listeners may be innately receptive to music considered by many listeners to be too difficult and too weird.

Each of these three authors posits that there is something specific to the disabled experience that makes disabled knowledge not just different from non-disabled knowledge, but also generative in its difference. For Garland-Thomson and Piepszna-Samarasinha, disabled knowledge includes things like navigating bureaucracy and setting up systems of care in communities; for Straus, disabled knowledge has to do with cognitive processing, and too is something that can be learned by the non-disabled (160). If readers read, at least in part, for what we know, and if what disabled people know is distinct from what non-disabled people know, then disabled and non-disabled readings are bound to be different from one another. What is crucial to the position of all three theorists is that the knowledge that comes from disabled experience is transferable. Disabled knowledge enriches broader conversations and offers perspectives that might otherwise never be considered. As playwright and performer Neil Marcus famously wrote in his long-running stage play *Storm Reading,* "[d]isability is an art … an ingenious way to live" (32:10). This ingenuity offers new tools of interpretation and problem-solving which benefit the non-disabled as well as the disabled. If, as Straus believes, non-autistic music listeners can train themselves to listen for what autistic people hear (thus opening up new possibilities of engagement with "difficult" musical texts), then so, too, can non-autistic readers train themselves to experience a poem the way an autistic reader might. As philosopher Erin Manning writes of what she calls "autistic perception," "When we are engaged in practice, when we are subsumed by process, we often seek this kind of perception, and it is available to us all: autistic perception

does not exclusively belong to autistics" (14). We each have our own *particular and peculiar* potential when it comes to our interactions with the stuff of the world.

Autistic reading style is *particular* in the sense that it is unique to each reader *and* in the sense of being especially attentive to detail. A particular reader is also choosy about what, how, when, and under what conditions they read, which is consistent with many autistic individuals' ritual or rigidity around certain behaviours in relation to our interests (Anthony et al. 643). It is *peculiar* in that it may seem, to an outsider, unusual or weird, and in that it is the property or domain of the autistic reader alone. Allow me to add one more layer to my chosen descriptors. Examining the etymological origins of *particular* and *peculiar,* we find an intriguing fact: each word has, at one time, meant the other. *Particular* comes from the Latin *particularis,* meaning a part of, distinguished from the main; the OED includes "not universal" in its list of meanings. At its root is *particle,* or tiny, discrete piece of something, the smallest amount possible of a specific thing. From *particle* we get *particulate:* a great many tiny pieces of something. *Particular* has meant "odd" and "strange," and it has meant "familiar" and "intimate." To give the particulars of something is to give a detailed account. As for *peculiar,* it originates from the Latin *peculium,* meaning the items which one can consider one's own. Like *particular, peculiar* has meant "not like others" and "remarkable," as well as "strange" and "odd." One obsolete definition is "a person's private interest or special concern." Another is "a detail." The two words are similar, but different; they echo one another. My autistic reading style is *particular and peculiar,* too-close, enmeshed and entangled.

To sum up: autistic reading, as I experience it, is informed by a relationship with language that does not privilege semantic meaning over sensory effect. It is detail-oriented, analytic, and intertextual, and the correlations drawn by the reader both within the text itself and between the

text and other texts may be based on the reader's idiosyncratic system of categorization rather than on easily explained parallels.

Autism poetics and autistic poetry

One critical text that has strongly influenced my thinking on autistic language is Julia Miele Rodas's *Autistic Disturbances.* Rodas performs close readings (I would say: autistically close) of the language usage reported in foundational writings by Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner, and identifies five categories of autistic language: *ricochet, apostrophe, ejaculation, discretion,* and *invention.* There is a sixth, actually: *silence,* which, in Rodas's estimation is as rhetorically charged as any of the others. Through the next four chapters, I will return to Rodas's taxonomy over and over, identifying where and how each poet's output resonates with Rodas's thinking. It makes sense, then, to introduce Rodas's classifications here.

Silence is a significant category of autistic language usage, and a complicated one; in terms of communication, silence is not language at all, but the absence (or withholding) of speech. Silence overlaps conceptually with mutism; mutism is recognized as "an important autism indicator" in the diagnostic material, and the idea that most, if not all autistic people are partially or completely nonspeaking is pervasive. Rodas doesn't deny that mutism is a common experience of autistic people; rather, she disputes conventional narrative which suggests that *not speaking* is the same as *having nothing to say* (35). Surveying the clinical literature on autistic mutism, Rodas concludes that the "trouble" is "not that autism does not speak, but rather that autism does not typically speak in an approved manner, in ways which are seamlessly and intuitively absorbed." She writes:

> In terms of the cultural construction of autism, then, the idea is first and most overwhelmingly that autism is silent, but even when autism is recognized as verbal, the consensus is that the speaking is "peculiar," "incomprehensible," "incoherent," "nonsensical," or, again in Kanner's words, "semantically and conversationally clueless."
>
> (39)

For the autistic subject, then, silence is pathologized, and sound is rewritten as no better than silence—if autistic utterance is devoid of meaning, then it might as well not be taken seriously as utterance at all. In Rodas's estimation here—and this is M. Remi Yergeau's perspective in *Authoring Autism* as well—if autistics are not *actually silent,* then they are *silenced* by the incoherence of their language. Yergeau sees in this phenomenon the autistic rhetor being "denied rhetoricity" (40).

A poem may be read silently, but it is a sort of speech act, recorded in text. Any poet whose words are published has what we call a *voice;* someone, somewhere, has read or is reading their work. Voice, in this sense, is not the effect of vibrations, air, larynx, lips, tongue, teeth. Voice here is a metaphor, standing in for something like *the things a person is likely to say,* and for *how a person is likely to say the things they say.* To "have a voice" is shorthand for "to be listened to," but, as Yergeau and Rodas both demonstrate, simply being able to make sounds does not guarantee that anyone will engage with those sounds as rhetorical. I have long been interested in the place of silence in poetry, either as represented on the page by empty space, or as part of a poem's content—speakers who cannot find the right word, who trip over their tongues, who stutter and who are diverted, who struggle to get at exactly what they mean. Silence is part of the texture of speech.

Ricochet is the first of Rodas's five main categories of autistic language usage. "Next to silence," she says, "verbal repetition is without a doubt the most noticed and most commented upon feature of autistic language" (40). *Echolalia* is the clinical term for this phenomenon. Audra Mitchell critiques the conventional perception of echolalia as "a sonic marker of the monstrous and, literally, spectral entity of 'autism' that is feared to be invading, disfiguring and weakening the body of 'humanity' just as it faces unprecedented threats" (1235); for Mitchell, echolalia is neither hollow nor arhetorical, but is in fact an essential and meaningful mode of autistic expression, and "a distinctly Autistic practice of *worlding:* the ways in which beings (human and otherwise) collaboratively imagine, negotiate, materialize, contest and transform the conditions of our coexistence" (1239). Another term used in describing this phenomeonon is *verbal stereotypy*. There is a subtle distinction between the two phrases: *echolalia,* as the "echo" part suggests, is seen as sort of verbal copying of heard sounds (commercial jingles, parental refrains, and dialogue from television and film are common ones), while *verbal stereotypy* is the voiced counterpart of autistic repeated movement, and is a sort of verbal stimming. Rodas illustrates the phenomenon in two ways: she examines a passage from Kanner's "Autistic Disturbances" in which a child subject, Donald T., is reported to repeat the phrase "Dahlia dahlia dahlia" with some frequency (his other favourite utterances include "Chrysanthemum," "Trumpet vine," and "Through the dark clouds shining"). Rodas rejects Kanner's pathologizing of Donald T.'s utterances, pointing out that autistic expression in fact "very often resonates with delight." Rodas foregrounds the fact that even Kanner admitted (perhaps grudgingly) that Donald T. "seemed to have much pleasure ejaculating words such as "Chrysanthemum"; "Dahlia, dahlia, dahlia" (Kanner, qtd. in Rodas 33). Rodas, then, takes "Dahlia, dahlia, dahlia," "Chrysanthemum," and others and incorporates them into her own language usage. They pop up, in italics, throughout the

book, often serving as a sort of punctuation. Donald T.'s verbal stereotypy becomes Julia Miele Rodas's echolalia. Both forms of repetition are classed, for Rodas, as *ricochet.*

Repetition is foundational to poetry; arguably, repetition—of vowel and consonant sounds to form rhyme and alliteration, of syllable stresses to form cadence and meter—is what makes poetry *poetry* and not just funny-shaped prose. Traditional poetic forms like the villanelle and the pantoum are built around the systematic repetition of selected lines; the sestina and its variations all involve patterns of repeated end-words. Then, of course, there are the forms that lift lines or passages from elsewhere: the glosa, which starts with a quatrain borrowed from another poem and then absorbs the borrowed lines into its own body; the cento, which is composed entirely of lines from other people's poems; found poetry, which transforms prose writing—sometimes as mundane as road signs or instruction manuals—into verse. A reader need only spend a few minutes with the footnotes to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* to see just how much of poetry is echo.

The difference, as I see it, between poetic repetition and autistic echolalia and verbal sterotypy is that in the case of poetry the repetition is *presumed meaningful,* while in the case of autistic expression it is *presumed meaningless.* Readers of poetry strive to decode the repetitions and echoes they discern in a poet's work; meanwhile, Kanner-informed approaches maintain that autistic repetitions and echoes are without any meaning at all. Rodas summarizes Kanner's position as she criticizes it: the "autist echoes because she is hollow, nothing inside; she has no self, no point of origin. Since the words are all form and no substance, their expressive value is effaced" (44). This conventional view of autistic repetition—of ricochet—will be especially relevant when we come to Anne Carson, and specifically to critic David Solway's assessment of Carson as a poetic and scholarly fraud.

For Rodas, ricochet also signifies abundance; she writes that "[a]utistic repetition is at once an indication of vacancy and a torrent, an overpowering, intimidating eruption of language" (44). I can think of few better exemplars of verbal ricochet than Gerard Manley Hopkins, who writes in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves": "Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wind / Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety ' upon áll on twó spools; párt, pen, pack / Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds – black, white; ' right, wrong; reckon but, reck but, mind …" (lines 10-12). Hopkins's "skéined stained véined," "párt, pen, páck," and "reckon but, reck but" do seem, to me, to share a kinship with Donald T.'s "Dahlia dahlia dahlia" and "Through the dark clouds shining." The difference is at least partly in the degree of competence their audiences ascribe to the person uttering them.

Apostrophe is the next category of autistic speech Rodas identifies, and it, like ricochet, is a category of excess. Apostrophe speaks to the breadth and length of autistic speech, a rejection of concision. Autistic writer Steacy Easton calls this mode "infodump formalism" (Easton, qtd. in Rodas 46). The precocious, abundant flow of autistic "infodumping"—an enthusiastic sharing of detailed information, often considered one of autism's "love languages" ("Autistic Love Languages")—is of such concern to clinicians that six of the eighty Likert scaled statements in the RAADS-2 diagnostic tool are dedicated specifically to abundant verbal output:

> It is difficult for me to start and stop a conversation. I need to keep going until I am finished.
>
> I cannot tell if someone is interested or bored with what I am saying.
>
> Sometimes a thought or subject gets stuck in my mind and I have to talk about it even if no one is interested.

> When I talk to someone, it can be very hard to change the subject. If the other person does so, I can get very upset and confused.
>
> When talking to someone, I have a hard time telling when it is my turn to talk or to listen.
>
> People tell me that I give too much detail. (Ritvo et al. 1085–1088)

Rodas proposes that "the excesses and abundances of autistic voice, its talking past, its nondialogic singularity" be "reclaimed as poetic apostrophe" (50). In classical poetry, apostrophe is a "turning away" from the broader audience to address a specific person (often someone who is not present within the narrative—the dead, or someone who has gone elsewhere), or to direct one's speech toward a non-human animal or object as though it were human.

Rodas reframes autistic monologuing as fundamentally poetic; I agree that it is, and would add that some poetic apostrophe is aesthetically autistic. It's not hard to see Hopkins as someone whose poems fall into the category of "infodump," and whose prodigious output might seem overabundant; his overflowing sonnets alone qualify as apostrophic by Rodas's metric. Emily Dickinson's individual poems are short and gnomic, and play with silence as much as with speech, but taken as a whole (which I will rationalize in my chapter on Dickinson), they create a poetic torrent. Anne Carson's *Short Talks* is an entire collection of poems formulated as addresses to an unspecified audience. Les Murray's output was prolific, his vocabulary was astoundingly broad, and his poems encompassed everything from global politics to farming equipment; Murray's collection *Translations from the Natural World* is particularly infodumpish/apostrophic, presenting itself as a catalogue of poems in the voices of Australian plants and animals.

Next for Rodas is *ejaculation,* "the tendency to blurt out, to speak in ways that seem uncontrolled, disconnected, inappropriate, fragmentary, indiscrete, and abrasive" (51). Rodas lifts the word "ejaculation" here, with all its implications, from Kanner, who used the word extensively in reports on his autistic child subjects. Kanner's rhetoric, Rodas argues, "establishes a model in which the abruptness of autistic speaking, its seemingly uncontrolled spurting, creates discomfort, embarrassment, and an underlying association with erotic and forbidden language" (52). Like apostrophe, ejaculation is seen as one-sided, an outward expression that precludes the possibility of a shared communication—a masturbatory form of communication that casts a particularly unsavoury light on the "self-stimulating" element of what has been relabeled "stimming."

Another category in Rodas's catalogue is *discretion:* "verbal systematizing, discrete and disciplined uses of language, the catalogic and the taxonomic. Bibliography, encyclopedia, lexicon, manifest, inventory" (57). It is a broad category: taxonomy and discipline (that is: rule-following) are not wholly overlapping concepts, but they are related by their logic of "what is/what is not." Ralph John Savarese identifies order—that is, systematic, disciplined use of language—as one of the elements of poetry that attracts autistic people. Savarese writes:

> When teaching poetry writing workshops to classical autistics, I invariably ask them to write a villanelle. The first time I did so, I was astonished at how quickly and effectively they managed the task; in the same amount of time, my "control group" of nonautistic education professors managed maybe six or seven of the required nineteen lines. One autist claimed that the form itself was autistic—its perseverative, morphing refrains were "like the patterns of light on her front lawn," she typed. (Savarese and Zunshine 36)

I have mentioned above that the villanelle involves systematic repetition, a controlled ricochet. The villanelle is considered a difficult form because of its many rules, but these rules are precisely what make it appealing to Savarese's students. One of these students, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, has published a number of poetry collections; his verse leans heavily toward the formal. In the notes to a poem about stimming—in this case, hand-flapping—Mukhopadhyay writes, "I may not be able to follow social rules but I can at least follow the rules of a Villanelle" (44). I will reintroduce the idea of discretion in my chapters on Dickinson and Carson, both of whom engage in projects I consider fundamentally taxonomic. Murray, too, engages in taxonomy; his poems in the voices of Australian flora and fauna in *Translations from the Natural World* are very much part of a taxonomic project, as are the dictionary-like elements of *Poems the Size of Postcards.* I will explore these experiments in cataloguing later.

Rodas identifies *invention* as the last of her categories of autistic language usage. Invention is what Rodas calls "the elaboration and repurposing, the hacking and modding of ready-made language to transform it into startling new expressive patterns" (64–65). Invention, of course, is what marks poetic language: the unexpected metaphors, the intriguing sonic and semantic juxtapositions, the multiple meanings. In my introduction, I referred to a paper by Werth et al. in which Grace, an autistic woman, surprises her observers by having the capacity for humour. Grace's language exemplifies autistic invention; she loves puns and portmanteaus, and she delights in neologisms: "Later on we got to King's Cross, we vamperated the train, then we consailed the King's Cross underground [sings] 'Going underground, going thunderground'" (116). Grace's observers even include an appendix with their glosses on her idiosyncratic language in case her jokes have gone over their readers' heads. Grace's neologisms aren't gibberish; "vamperated" works because it mimics the past tense of a latinate verb (from the

imaginary French *vamperer?* or perhaps the imaginary Italian *vampare?*). "Vamperated" demonstrates that Grace is acutely aware of how words, sounds, phonemes work. The word is a sophisticated invention, and a successful comedic intervention, because of its plausibility; it could, and perhaps *should* be a real word.

Invention in language—new uses of known words, introduction of new words—is present in most poetry, and certainly in the poetry I examine in the chapters to come. Invention in form is present as well; Emily Dickinson's short verses, for example, echo the "common measure" or hymn/ballad verse form that was popular in Protestant churches of her time, but her variations on it, including her effusive dashes, make the form distinctly hers. Gerard Manley Hopkins went so far as to invent his own meter, a "sprung rhythm" marked by diacritics (as seen in the excerpt above). His sonnets lashed at their margins and expanded out beyond the form's traditional limits; his poems teem with words like *throughther, páshed, disremembering,* and (as I will discuss at length in the next chapter) *damasked.* There is a playfulness in this linguistic invention, and there is also a sense of necessity: for people who dwell in detail—the too-close-readers of the world—finding just the right phrase to express an experience or an emotion is a tricky task. There aren't many true synonyms in the English language; each word has its own set of nuances, and what is a person to do if none of these nuances are exactly the right ones? Invention is the only option: *we vamperated the train, steepèd and páshed.*

I think Rodas's study is extraordinary, and exemplary of an autistic mode of scholarship that doesn't just allow for autistic-type readings, but indeed celebrates them. Rodas's project is the same as mine; she aims "to explore the tensions of language and culture that lead to the classification of some verbal expression as disordered while other, similar expression enjoys prized status as literature" via pursuit of "resonances between explicitly identified autistic

speaking and conventionally approved literary text" (3). However, there is a significant lacuna in Rodas's book: despite her use of the term "poetics," she examines very little poetry. While Rodas does dedicate half of one chapter to the list-making poetics of Walt Whitman, Georges Perec, Raymond Carver, and David Antin, the rest of her analytic chapters examine prose: Andy Warhol's *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol,* Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,* Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe.* Selfishly, I am pleased by her omission, as it allows me to pick up where she leaves off, and to apply the poetics she has developed to the poems I love.

Diagnosing? Neuroqueering? Takes one to know one?

Early in *Autistic Disturbances,* Rodas describes an "aesthetic entanglement" at work in autism studies in general, and in her own work. She identifies autism as narratively constituted, and the diagnosis of ASD as based not on any hard, measurable data (blood tests, brain scans, etc.) but on "the productions of the autistic self—its stims, its gestures, its reactions, its behaviors, its language" (11). Autism is something clinicians essentially *read for,* performing a close reading of their patient or client or research subject. One thing Rodas is careful to explain is that she is *not* selecting books based on her impression of the author as autistic, nor is she reading for evidence of neurological difference in the author. Unlike scholars who engage in "retrospective and speculative diagnosis" (Michael Fitzgerald is one of these, as is Julie Brown, to whom I will return in chapter three), Rodas is happy to leave the authors alone, examining *the texts themselves* as autistic. "Autism," she suggests, "may be understood as an aesthetic, a way of seeing and interpreting, a vantage, a mode, a set of expressive practices" (29). An autistic person can, in theory, write a text devoid of autistic aesthetic (Rodas identifies mainstream autism memoir, such

as writing by Temple Grandin, as self-consciously un-autistic in form), and a non-autistic person can, in theory, write a text that checks all the boxes of autistic language usage.

I appreciate the distinction Rodas makes and I recognize her reasons for making it, and yet, I am also unable to rid myself of the urge to name what I see in the poetry of Hopkins, Dickinson, and Carson (and, obviously, Murray). To me, each poet's work demonstrates what I consider to be an autistic mode of engagement with the world. I would suggest that the resistance to naming "aesthetically autistic" authors as autistic comes from the imbrication of *naming autism* and *pathologizing autistic people.* Put differently: pathologizing people (especially without their consent) is wrong, but naming someone autistic is only pathologizing them *if you believe autism to be a pathology.* Put differently again: calling someone "autistic" is only bad if you believe autism to be a bad thing. A more neutral position is found in what has been called the *neurodiversity paradigm,* an approach which values *neurocosmopolitanism*—the position that neurological difference is not just something to be accepted or tolerated, but something worth celebrating with openness and genuine curiosity. Nick Walker, one of two scholars to coin the term, writes that "[t]he neurocosmopolitan seeks to actively engage with and preserve human neurodiversity, and to honor, explore, and cultivate its creative potentials…" (74). Just as the process of *queering* texts—that is, reading for evidence of same-sex desire, gender fluidity, non-normative sexual and gender identities, and so on—has become a respected area of literary scholarship, so too perhaps has the time come for *neuroqueering* to emerge as a sub-field of literary studies.

I have stated my criteria for choosing Hopkins, Dickinson, Murray, and Carson as the subjects of this dissertation: they exhibit exuberance in their language use, and they write in such a way as to create a sort of playground for the autistic reader. I am not the only autistic reader to identify with the four poets I've included here. Hopkins, especially, is beloved by autistic readers;

Emil Roy et al., in their article "Autistic Poetry as Therapy," detect in a piece of writing by autistic poet Jasmine Lee O'Neill an allusion to Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur" which contributes to a "dreamy simplicity and heavenly atmosphere" (34). And in Michael Bakan's study on music and autism, titled *Speaking for Ourselves,* autistic writer Ibby Grace offers that poetry has helped her bridge the gap between musical and verbal communication. "Gerard Manley Hopkins is my guy" (90), Grace writes, and this is confirmed in her multiple blog posts on Hopkins, across different platforms. Kristina Chew identifies parallels between the way Hopkins "heaps up *things"* and the way her minimally speaking autistic son Charlie uses language; writing about Hopkins's poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire," Chew says,

> Hopkins relies on the accumulated similarities and repetitions of sounds ("sq"; the long vowel sounds of "oo" and "ee" and "ough"; the staccato beats of "crust, dust; stanches, starches"). These lines represent an aspect of the experience of language for a child with autism who struggles just to distinguish among the phonemes and vowel sounds, who is most comfortable using concrete language, and has a very difficult time grasping abstract notions, such as "truth," or "faith." ("Fractioned" 137)

Les Murray, the one poet I've included in this study who *did* identify publicly as autistic, was a great lover of Hopkins; as Daniel Tammet writes, "Murray was entranced by Gerard Manley Hopkins's words, tried them out on his tongue" (64). Tammet, too, is autistic, and a poet, and the resonance he feels with Hopkins via Murray is worth noting.

Emily Dickinson has long been adopted as an autistic avatar, especially by late-in-life diagnosed autistic women; so convincing is her posthumous diagnosis that her name shows up

frequently on online lists of famous autistics.[7] Of course, as I will examine in chapter three, Dickinson has been diagnosed with any number of conditions, and the evidence for each has been compelling. Indeed, Dickinson can be read as an emblem of why "diagnosing the dead," as the habit is known, can be vexing. We are none of us Dickinson's doctor, nor her confidante. And yet, to a reader observing Dickinson through an autism lens, the resonance between her poetry and autistic communication is obvious. I would say the same for Anne Carson, who, unlike Dickinson, is alive and well and could tell those who speculate about her neurological configuration to go fly a kite, if she so wished. In chapter five I assert that whether or not Carson identifies as autistic, she no doubt is well aware that *other people* see her that way, for better or for worse.

Ultimately, the neurological differences that have influenced the poetry of Anne Carson, Les Murray, Emily Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins are of no real consequence; this project is about how these poets write, *and* about how I read them. Do they write autistically? I think so, but that's just my opinion. Do I read autistically? Yes, I do; this is a fact. And so, let me begin.

[7] In a 2022 article called "20 Famous People With Autism" on the website *Early Childhood Education Degrees,* Dickinson is listed as #2, between Temple Grandin, #1, and autistic memoirist John Elder Robinson, #3("20 Famous People"). A website called *Inflow* lists Dickinson among their "71 famous people with autism (2023 edition), grouping her with Albert Einstein and Andy Warhol under the heading "Historical figures with (suspected) autism" (Mannion).

Chapter 2: Naïve reading, failure, and "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves"

So far in this study, I have placed an emphasis on joy, playfulness, exuberance: emotional phenomena most of us would, no doubt, consider "positive." I intend to return to these notions, but I begin this chapter on Gerard Manley Hopkins with another, less pleasing state: failure.

Failure is the space where Hopkins and I meet. To be autistic is to fail—over and over again—to communicate, to interpret, and to experience the world *as you're supposed to.* As my autism screening report and the questions in assessment tools like the RAADS-R demonstrate, autism is about not being able to do "people stuff" the way other people seem to do it. But failure is also a generative state; scholar Tara Brabazon challenges the binary opposition of failure and success, claiming that failure "provides us with the very punctuation, if you will, the grammar of our emancipation and our freedom" ("The Post 54"). For Brabazon, failure is a source of knowledge; "it exists," she argues, "to make us feel vulnerable," and that vulnerability, in turn, "increases our awareness of the asymmetries of power." While I don't believe this to always be the case—it is all to easy, in my experience, to wallow in a sense of failure rather allowing oneself to become radicalized by it—I will concede that once we do embrace the knowledge that failure exposes, it is difficult to un-see the systems and structures that clear the path for one person's successes while erecting barriers to someone else's.

In his 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure,* Jack Halberstam identifies that despite the "disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" that often come along with human experiences of failure, it is through failure that we can "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Failure, for Halberstam "preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs

supposedly clean boundaries between children and adults, winners and losers" (3). I would extend Halberstam's list: failure disturbs the boundary, too, between abled and disabled, allistic and autistic; one need only examine the use of ableist slurs against people who slip up, fumble, misspeak, or who tend to misread social scenarios to see how quickly anyone can be labeled (or, indeed, can label themselves) with terminology pulled from the annals of psychiatric history.[1]

Gerard Manley Hopkins was an extraordinary poet and, by his own estimation, a failure. Despite his phenomenal intellect and his polymathic interests, Hopkins spent his later life not at Oxford (he had studied at Balliol College), but at the under-resourced University College in Dublin, where, as Gerald Roberts explains in his introduction to Hopkins's *Selected Prose,* "[t]he library was in a deplorable condition, and opportunities for writing by staff were severely handicapped by excessive teaching and examining duties" (9). His poems were considered unpublishable, and even his dear friend Robert Bridges refused, after a while, to take any more stabs at reading Hopkins's poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (Hopkins, *Major Works* xxv). "Deutschland" was itself emblematic of Hopkins's failure to *quit* writing poetry, which he had attempted to do as a form of priestly sacrifice (R. Martin 174). When Hopkins tried to give up writing, he couldn't, and when he wanted to write, he couldn't do that either; in his notes from 1889, Hopkins writes "What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time … All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all" (Hopkins, *Selected* 165). He did, in fact, die just six months later.

[1] At this particular historical moment, "autist" is, apparently, a common insult among online gaming communities; Cecilia D'Anastasio writes that "[a]n eye for specifics or a remarkable memory for lore draws the same toxic stereotypes of the outdated insult 'retard'" (D'Anastasio).

Different bodyminds, different metaphors

I draw on Halberstam here to propose that my *particular and peculiar* reading style is also a *naïve* reading style. Halberstam suggests that scholars ought to invest in "counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity" (11), and adopt a reading praxis which privileges *"the naïve or nonsensical"* (12). In Halberstam's estimation, "the naïve or ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices" (12); this, indeed, is my position in undertaking my study. To read naïvely means, in part, to read literally: to take a writer's words at face value (note, of course, that *at face value* is itself a metaphor). Literality, as I mentioned in my introductory chapter, is something with which autistics have a complicated relationship; many of us are considered to possess an "obdurate literality," an "inability to comprehend figurative language, particularly metaphor," which "is frequently cited as a debilitating aspect" of autism (Savarese, "What Some Autistics" 393–5). This position, which Ralph James Savarese challenges so elegantly in his 2015 book chapter "What Some Autistics Can Teach Us About Poetry: A Neurocosmopolitan Approach," seems to misunderstand both autism *and* metaphor. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on figurative language demonstrates, we speak in metaphor all the time; indeed, we don't just speak it, but live it. "[T]he way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (13), Lakoff and Johnson write in the first chapter of their classic 1980 study, *Metaphors We Live By*. Like Francesca Happé, whose exposure to autistic literality prompts her to realize that "one is speaking in metaphors" much of the time, Lakoff and Johnson identify our language as fundamentally metaphorical—*so* metaphorical that we take many everyday metaphors as literal. Who among us would easily identify *stop wasting my time* or *I came down with the flu* as metaphors?

If we find ourselves "speaking in metaphors" much of the time, then what is to be made of the non-metaphorical components of verbal communication? Much less thought has been given to what exactly *non-metaphorical, non-figurative language* might look like. Raymond Gibbs et al. point out that theorists have never come to a consensus on what literal meaning even *is;* they argue that while "a great deal of attention has been paid to the problem of defining figurative language (e.g., what defines metaphor?) little discussion has been devoted to the definition of literal meaning" (388).[2] In a 1993 essay called "Literal Meaning and Figurative Language," Gibbs et al. identify "five different meanings for *literal,"* which they classify as (in their words):

- Conventional literality, in which literal usage is contrasted with poetic usage, exaggeration, embellishment, indirectness, and so on.
- Subject-matter literality, in which certain expressions are the usual ones used to talk about a particular topic.
- Nonmetaphorical literality, or directly meaningful language, in which one word (concept) is never understood in terms of a second word (or concept).
- Truth-conditional literality, or language that is capable of "fitting the world" (i.e., of referring to objectively existing objects or of being objectively true or false).
- Context-free literality, in which the literal meaning of an expression is its meaning apart from any communicative situation or its meaning in a "null" context.

(388–389)

[2] I can't help but notice here a parallel between the lack of agreement around what constitutes literality, as identified by Gibbs et al., and the lack of research around exuberance identified by Redfield Jamieson, as noted in my introductory chapter.

Of particular interest to me are the samples of figurative language used by Gibbs et al. in their study. The researchers asked sixty University of California, Santa Cruz undergraduates to rank a series of statements according to their literality; among the samples considered the least "literal" were the statements classified by the researchers as "Contextuals," which were as follows:

> The ham sandwich spilled beer all over himself.
>
> The tuxedo asked me out on a date.
>
> He's home jetlagging.
>
> Bill houdinied his way out of the closet.
>
> The telephone managed to get a word in.
>
> The debater porpoised his way through the arguments. (402)

I don't imagine that autistic language usage was on the researchers' minds when they compiled these sample statements, but these sentences could easily have been pulled from Werth et al.'s study of Grace and her puns and neologisms, or indeed from Leo Kanner's notebooks. The most autistic language use is the one the (presumably allistic) UCSC students found the least literal, and the most impenetrable.

I have lingered on literality because my reading of Hopkins's late poem "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" is, in some ways, much more literal than the classic interpretation. At the same time, it is thoroughly metaphorical. The metaphors typically identified by scholars of Hopkins have been frustratingly abstract; the ones I see are perfectly—almost comically—concrete. My reading and the canonical ones are all informed by a perceived sense of knowing who Hopkins was and how he experienced the world, but the contexts from which that perception emerges are

thoroughly different. How do I explain this difference? The conceptual theory of metaphor popularized by Lakoff and Johnson relies on a set of universal, or near-universal correspondences. These correspondences emerge from what are believed by the authors to be shared human embodied experiences relating to different emotional and phenomenological states; thus, categories of metaphor emerge, like ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER and HAPPY IS UP. Zoltan Kövecses argues that Lakoff's and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory is insufficient precisely because of this reliance on a universal embodied experience (Kövecses). ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER takes for granted that people experience a sense of internal pressure and a feeling of increased body heat in response to the emotion we label "anger." HAPPY IS UP relies on a specific spatial relationship associated with the emotion we label "happiness." For autistic people, these correspondences might not reflect our experiences of emotions at all. One common characteristic of autism is *alexithymia,* that is, "difficulty identifying and describing one's emotions and a tendency to focus on external, rather than internal, experiences" (Morie et al. 2936). My embodied experience of anger doesn't at all suggest HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. If anything, it resembles what allistics seem to associate with profound sadness: I become slow, quiet, and tearful. Many autistic people have impaired or atypical spatial awareness (Cardillo et al.); for these people, HAPPY IS UP might not hold much currency. I might use the idioms associated with HAPPY IS UP, but my own association with happiness is *groundedness;* for me, happy is down. While Kövecses acknowledges that some universals may exist, he writes that:

> [t]he universal bodily basis on which universal metaphors *could* be built *may* not be utilized in the same way or to the same extent in different languages and cultures. What [this] means is that different peoples may be attuned to different aspects of their bodily functioning in relation to a metaphorical target domain, or that they can ignore or

> downplay certain aspects of their bodily functioning with respect to the metaphorical conceptualization of a target domain. (12)

Kövecses's critique of Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory emerges from the recognition of *cultural* differences in embodiment; I will suggest here that the differences in embodiment between non-disabled and disabled, allistic and autistic language users (and emotion-embody-ers) are just as significant. My embodied (embodyminded) experience is different than that of an allistic person; therefore, my metaphorical correlations may not match up with theirs.

Reading naively

In approaching "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" naively, and in working from the bottom up to make meaning from the poem's details, I am reminded of the character of Eli Cash (impeccably portrayed by actor Owen Wilson) in the 2001 film *The Royal Tenenbaums,* directed by Wes Anderson. In a sequence introducing the film's characters to the viewer, we meet novelist and "assistant professor of English at Brooks College" Cash at what appears to be the launch of his newest literary western. After the reading, Cash contextualizes his novel for reporters, saying, "Well, everyone knows Custer died at Little Big Horn. What this book presupposes is: maybe he didn't?" I say, everyone knows that "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" is a poem about apocalyptic desolation and the agonies of the End of Days. What my reading presupposes is: maybe it isn't? Eli Cash's approach is a bottom-up approach, and, to my mind, a fundamentally autistic one: what do we find when we wilfully set aside the accepted wisdom around a topic?

Hopkins might seem like a poor choice for a "naïve" reading. Too far outside the literary norms of the nineteenth century, his poetry remained largely unpublished until 1918, two decades after his death. Hopkins's poetry is densely intertextual. He was an ecstatic collector of facts, filling notebooks with observations and theories, and he had a particular love for languages and etymologies. He was also fascinated by sound, and was adamant that poetry ought to be spoken aloud in order for it to be truly and completely experienced (Tackett 147). These two forces—the encyclopedic knowledge of semantic meaning and the admitted privileging of sound-sense in his poetry—make Hopkins fiercely difficult to parse. The seeming inconsistency is perfectly consistent with the rest of what we know Hopkins to have been. He was an Englishman and a Roman Catholic; a man of God and a man of science; a sensualist committed to a life of Jesuit austerity.[3] He was every bit a both/and character, a study in contrasts.

Hopkins's poetic style—fragmented, echoic, disruptive, inventive—eventually earned him ardent admirers who perceived in his work a sort of proto-modernism. But his poetry was not universally appreciated; a 1919 reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* opined that Hopkins's technique of favouring sonic effects over semantic ones resulted in an "effect almost of idiocy, of speech without sense and prolonged merely by echoes" (Clutten-Brock, qtd. in Tackett 147). T.S. Eliot shared this opinion of Hopkins's language usage as semantically vacant; in his 1933 Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia, Eliot claims that while Hopkins's innovations "certainly were good," they, "like the mind of their author, operate only within a narrow range." Hopkins's poems, Eliot complains, "sometimes come near to being purely verbal,

[3] Hopkins converted from the Church of England to Roman Catholicism as a young man (much to his Anglican family's dismay), and was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1877. The Jesuits, also known as the Society of Jesus, are a Catholic order strongly associated with education. Hopkins's life as a Jesuit required him to take "vows of perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience" (Storey 43). This undoubtedly played a role in his eventual assignment to the cash-strapped University College in Dublin as an instructor; as Jill Muller explains, as a Jesuit, Hopkins's salary of £400 a year "would revert to the university" (74), making his employment lucrative for the College's administration.

in that a whole poem will give us more of the same thing, an accumulation, rather than a real development of thought or feeling" (47). What Eliot sees in Hopkins is *ricochet,* in Rodas's terms, and *apostrophe,* and *ejaculation.* The suggestion that Hopkins's mind "operate[s] only within a narrow range" characterizes Hopkins the same way Ritvo et al.'s screening characterizes autistics with the statement "I only like to think and talk about a few things that interest me" (1084). What Eliot fails to detect is that Hopkins's expressive "accumulation" is never "purely verbal"; it is not, as the *TLS* reviewer suggests, "speech without sense," but rather speech that requires engagement if the reader wants to *make sense of it.*

Hopkins's poems have been poked and prodded by critics and editors hoping the works will give up their meanings; so too has the text of Hopkins's bodymind been poked and prodded for some kind of explanation of the poet's lifelong "oddness." Theorists have retroactively diagnosed the poet with manic depression (G. Johnson 153) and with Asperger syndrome (Fitzgerald 125); an article in medical journal *The Lancet* argues compellingly that Hopkins's physical complaints as well as his lethargy and malaise were likely the result of Crohn's disease (Flegel 1019). Flegel cites evidence that Hopkins described himself as melancholic, and he complained of "neuralgia," painful "gout or rheumatism of the eyes"—likely Crohn's-related posterior uveitis, Flegel suggests (1019). In his early prose writing, Hopkins described his experience of what we now call "number-space synesthesia," an ability to "see" numbers in space (Paxton 247) which is often associated with savant syndrome and with autism. The choice of "idiocy" in the *Times Literary Supplement* review speaks volumes; Hopkins lived in a time period referred to by researcher Simon Jarrett as "the great incarceration," in which people deemed "idiots" were being removed from public life and shifted into asylums where they could be kept from view. "In wider cultural representations, including poetry and novels," Jarrett writes, "the

idiot became either a helpless shadow person, not really fit to live a human life, or a dangerous threat who warranted confinement" (216). In the early twentieth century, the development of IQ tests allowed medical experts to quantify the extent of an individual's feeble-mindedness; "idiots" were at the bottom of the ranking, with an IQ of zero to 25; above them were "imbeciles," who scored from 26 to 50, and "morons," who scored between 51 and 70 IQ points (264). By invoking idiocy, the *TLS* critic is suggesting that Hopkins's poetry resembles the babbling of someone (purportedly) without meaningful speech, his words as "unsubjugated to the referential regime," as a semi-verbal autistic child's might be (Sterponi 2).

Hopkins's habits were conspicuous and strange; biographer and fellow Jesuit Joseph F. Feeney writes that the poet, "[w]ith playful curiosity … regularly tasted, smelled, or touched what interested him, whether alum, camphor, fuzzy fruit, or a cow's udder" (24). References abound to Hopkins's oddness, his "queerness,"[4] his flamboyance, his fixations, and his adherence to ritual and routine (Fitzgerald 111–125). Even Hopkins's eventual reception by the modernists as a poet "ahead of his time" suggests a sort of pathology, characterizing Hopkins as savant-like, an innocent, unworldly nineteenth-century Jesuit somehow able to speak the language of a war-broken twentieth century he could never have known.

For an autistic reader (or, for *this* autistic reader, at least) the poetry of Hopkins—with its assonance, consonance, dissonance, apostrophic exclamations, stuttering, circularity, structure, scaffolding, rhyme, repetition, extratextual references, mechanics, puns, and sonic extravagance—is like a fireworks display. Rodas doesn't include Hopkins's work in her survey of

[4] "Queerness" in all senses: Eugene O'Connor writes, "… it is anachronistic to apply a clinical term 'homosexual' to Hopkins, at least as he saw himself. A perhaps more timely and appropriate appellation, in Hopkins's case, would be 'invert'—inversion covering a broad range of deviant behaviour including male femininity and female masculinity" (97). I do not focus on Hopkins's sexual identity in this paper, but his effeminacy and same-sex desires are well documented as having added to the poet's reputation as a social misfit and outsider.

"autism poetics," but "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" offers examples of all five of the categories of autistic language practice Rodas identifies: *ricochet* ("réckon but, réck but, mind / But")[5], *apostrophe* ("Óur tale, O óur oracle! | Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wind…"), *ejaculation* ("Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous / Evening…"), *discretion* ("áll upon twó spools; párt, pen, páck / now her áll in twó flocks, two folds—bláck, white; | ríght, wrong"), and *invention* ("as- / Tray or awarm, all troughther, in throngs; | self ín self steepèd and páshed") (Rodas 19; Hopkins, *Major Works* 175). Hopkins exemplifies the "autistic language hacking, the joyful breaking down and retooling of conventional language" of which Rodas writes (8), so much so that the poems can seem unnavigable. A reader cited in I.A. Richards's 1929 *Practical Criticism* complained that Hopkins's poetry left him "attending exclusively to the sound and general feel of the word-pattern regardless of the sense" (81). Hopkins's soundscapes are part of what I love about his poetry. They are novel and almost scientific in their well-considered juxtapositions; they fulfil what Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel refer to as "the brain's habituated need for controlled novelty" (Turner and Pöppel 303). Their sound is exultant, furious, exuberant, and never, ever dull.

But all this focus on sound and pattern can, as Richards's respondent correctly claims, interfere with attempts to get to a poem's "sense," its content. It is for exactly this reason that I choose here to resist the draw of Hopkins's sounds, and attempt a "literal"—or, as "literal" as possible, given the fundamental metaphoricity of the English language—reading of "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves.

[5] I have preserved Hopkins's original markings here: a diacritic (´) over a vowel indicates that Hopkins intended that syllable to be stressed; the horizontal bar in the middle of Hopkins's lines (|) indicates a "caesura" or short pause.

“Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves”

Written during Hopkins’s unhappy years teaching in Dublin, and generally considered a precursor to the so-called “Terrible Sonnets” completed towards the end of his life, “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” is a sprawling, echoing, hiccupping sonnet filled with syntactical pileups and startling interjections. Canonical interpretation of the poem rests on the assumption that the “Sibyl” invoked in the poem’s title is the prophetess alluded to in the *Dies irae* or Catholic Mass of the Dead, a liturgical requiem dating to the thirteenth century. It is hard to tell where this interpretation of “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” as referring to the *Dies irae* originates. Robert Bridges makes no reference to the *Dies irae* in his lengthy notes prefacing the original publication of Hopkins’s poems; *Dies irae* is not indexed in the 1959 *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* edited by Humphrey House, and it is mentioned only once in Hopkins’s published letters to Bridges, in an 1882 correspondence about the qualities of Latin hymns (Hopkins and Bridges 302). Hopkins’s biographer Paul Mariani, in his *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life,* refers to “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” as Hopkins’s “own *dies irae”* without any further support or qualification (382). Catherine Phillips glosses the poem’s title as “an allusion to the opening verse of the ‘Dies irae’ in the Catholic Mass for the Dead: ‘Day of wrath, that day when the world is consumed to ash as David and Sibyl testify’” (Hopkins, *Major Works* 380); Lesley Higgins offers an almost identical gloss in the essay “Hopkins, in Three Words” (46) as do Helen Vendler in *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (30) and Martin Dubois in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Poetry of Religious Experience* (140). The unqualified appearance of this interpretative fact reads like a decades-long game of critical “telephone.”

But there were many Sibyls, and they made many prophecies. If readers start, top-down, with the wrong Sibyl, they have to perform some unusual manoeuvres to get the details to line up with the concept. Consider what Catherine Phillips does with the opening lines of the poem, which read: "Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous / Evening strains to be time's vast, | womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night" (lines 1–2). Hopkins is describing a sunset. Sunsets were one of his great passions; of the few pieces of writing Hopkins published during his lifetime, almost all of them were letters to the editor of *Nature* describing, in details as poetic as these, the so-called "Krakatoa sunsets," unusual visual phenomena caused by the volcanic eruption on the island of Krakatoa in 1883 (Hamblyn, "Krakatoa"). Hopkins's journals burst with sunset descriptions as exuberant as the colours themselves, and yet Catherine Phillips glosses "earnest" here to mean *solemn*, and "stupendous" to mean *terrifying* (Hopkins, *Major Works* 380). Why? There's nothing to suggest that Hopkins was terrified of sunsets, nor that he found them solemn. Most people aren't, and don't. There is nothing in "equal, attuneable, | vaulty, voluminous" that suggests anything other than wonder. "Voluminous" even has, embedded in it, the word *luminous*, a detail that would not have been lost on a word-fiend like Hopkins. A more literal reading for "earnest" is *earnest*—sincere, honest in its conviction—and a more literal reading for "stupendous" is *stupendous*—remarkable, extraordinary, astonishing. As for "night" as our collective womb, home, and hearse, that might be a bit of a glum thought, but by Victorian standards, in disease-riddled Dublin? Perhaps not so much. And it hardly seems out of character for a Jesuit to draw an arc from birth to death; questions of the soul were part of Hopkins's vocation.

The next lines of the poem describe the progression from light to darkness in the evening sky: "Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, | her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height

/ Waste; her earliest stars, earl-stars, | stars principal, overbend us, / Fíre-féaturing heaven. For éarth | her béing has unbound; her dápple is at énd …" (lines 3–5). Hopkins's description of the celestial goings-on is, as is so often the case in his writing, scientific in its detail. The "fond yellow hornlight" fades in the west, the "wild hollow hoarlight" rises in the east, and "stars principal, overbend us, Fíre-featuring héaven." "Hoarlight" is a grey light, a washed-out sky in contrast to the "Fíre-féaturing heaven" of the sunset. If you read the poem as an apocalyptic vision, then the "Fíre-featuring heaven" is a sky seething with the flames of judgment; if not, then it's just a beautiful sunset, like the hundreds of beautiful sunsets Hopkins recorded in his journals and letters. Here, it is the canonical reading that leans toward the literal, interpreting "Fíre-featuring héaven" as a sky actually filled with flame rather than as a sky coloured with the red, orange, and gold of sunset.

The next line, "For éarth | her béing has unboúnd; her dápple is at énd" is likewise typically parsed as a sign of the end-times, with "unboúnd" glossed to mean "falling apart," and as though earth's dapple is at its end *forever* instead of just for this evening. But, again: on what grounds? Vendler interprets this unbinding as Sibyl having "unboúnd" the leaves of her book of prophecies (37), but the subject of the clause is "éarth," not Sibyl. In contrast to the "earthless" firmament of the first line, life on the ground is decidedly, boundlessly "earthy" as darkness falls. Earth's "dápple is at énd, as- / Tray or aswarm, all throughther, in throngs; | self ín self steepèd and páshed—qúite / Disremembering, dísmémbering | all now …" (lines 5–7). What is happening here? To my mind, Hopkins is very aptly describing something many of us have experienced: the visual effect that occurs when one has been gazing at a glorious sunset and then turns and realizes that one is engulfed—*whelmed*—by darkness. The eyes take time to adjust; objects seem to move, to collapse and "pash" into one another. Discrete entities become indistinct. It is worth returning

here to the fact that Hopkins suffered devastating vision troubles and ocular "neuralgia," likely related to Crohn's disease, which itself caused him intense discomfort, malnutrition, physical weakness, and sleep disruption; in an 1888 letter to Bridges, Hopkins writes, "Can there be gout or rheumatism in the eyes? If there can I have it. I am a gouty piece now" (*Letters* 283). When Hopkins says, in the poem, "Óur évening is óver for us; óur night | whélms, whélms and will end us"—he *may* be talking about the eventuality of death (his, and everyone's) but is this uttered in terror, or as a comfort? Again: Hopkins was a Jesuit priest. His perception of death wasn't the same as mine is as a twenty-first century atheist. For someone who suffered as Hopkins did, death meant the promise of unity with Christ, and the promise of eternal relief from pain.

I have focused so far on the misreading that, I believe, comes from assigning the wrong Sibyl as the patron invoked in the poem's title. My naïve, bottom-up reading of the poem's first eight lines takes at its starting point the notion that the poem *isn't* a description of the earth's hellish undoing, but something else; it assumes that Hopkins is describing the moments when a "stupendous" sunset fades and the world is suddenly much darker than it had been. I am considering in my analysis the fact that Hopkins's eyesight was impaired as an effect of his chronic illness, and that this might account for the slightly surreal, almost preternatural descriptions of darkness in the poem.

Damasked if you do, damasked if you don't.

In the poem's final six lines, I see a second element that I feel has typically been misread or, in some analyses, skipped over entirely, and I will explain here how this oversight alters—inverts, even—interpretation. The single misconstrued word in question is right in the middle of the ninth line of the poem: "Only the beakleaved boughs dragonish | damask the tool-smooth bleak light;

black, / Ever so black on it" (lines 9–10). The word in question here is "damask." Typically, "damask" is interpreted in the poem as shorthand for "Damascus steel," but the word "damask" is also the name for a variety of textiles that would have been common in Hopkins's time; they are, indeed, still common now. Damascus steel and woven damask have very little in common, either literally or metaphorically. Damascus steel is a uniquely strong tempered steel used for swords and other blades, originating in India and Sri Lanka and exported through the Middle East and Europe up until the end of the nineteenth century. Swords made from Damascus steel were first encountered by Christians during the Crusades (Durand-Charre 47); given this context, a reading of "damask" as shorthand for "Damascus steel" in the poem evokes the notion of holy war, turning the poem's action into a battle between the righteous Christian and the demonic, dragon-filled sky. But is that really what Hopkins is suggesting? Look at how the line is constructed: the boughs, which are "beakleaved" and "dragonish" *are damasking* the "bleak" evening light. The boughs are "ever so black" against the grey, featureless sky. Hopkins uses "damask" as a verb with relative frequency in his writing, including in his descriptions of sunsets; in an 1871 journal entry, he describes seeing "such a lovely damasking in the sky as today I never felt before" (Hamblyn, "Krakatoa"). Note that the damasking in the letter is "lovely," not terrifying or unpleasant in any way. Alfred Borello's 1969 *A Concordance to the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* identifies one other instance of "damasked" in the poems; in Hopkins's poem "Io," the poet describes (in rather lusty detail, might I add) the mortal lover of Zeus who was transformed from a human woman into a heifer. Hopkins writes, of post-metamorphosis Io,

> Her milk-white throat and folded dewlap slack
> Are still; her neck is creased in close-ply rings;
> Her hue's a various brown with creamy lakes,

Like cupp'd chestnut damask'd with dark breaks. (lines 9–12)

Of the two potential readings of damask—supple, delicate textile and sharp, hard weapon—the former makes beautiful sense while the latter would be absurd, bordering on obscene. Io is a warm, soft, pleasing creature, and the language Hopkins uses is likewise sensuous and tactile: Io's dewlap is "folded," her neck is "creased" with rings that are "close-ply," that is, layered and looped atop one another. There is nothing here that encourages a reading where "damask'd" is meant to evoke "steel blade."

It is worth noting that Borello's *Concordance* identifies a different spelling of the word "damask" in Hopkins's very early (and, quite frankly, awful) poem, "The Escorial." Hopkins uses "damasqu'd" twice in the poem, in each case describing the ornately designed objects within the Renaissance architectural marvel known as Monasterio del Escorial. Hopkins describes the compound's "long corridors and cornic'd halls, // And damasqu'd arms and foliag'd carving piled" (lines 73–74). Two stanzas later, Hopkins writes that "Blades of Milan in circles rang'd, grew rust / And silver damasqu'd plates obscur'd in age's crust" (lines 97–98). In each of these cases, "damasqu'd" *is* used to suggest either *actual* Damascus steel, in the case of the "arms" (which I read as "armaments" here) or, in the case of the silver plates, the *appearance* of Damascus steel. The alteration in spelling could be a simple case of youthful affectation, but it seems just as likely that Hopkins, given his love of precision, felt the need to employ two different spellings because "damask" can mean two different things.

The textile known as damask is a woven fabric that Hopkins would have been in contact with every day; its primary uses are upholstery, table linens, and in the making of liturgical garments and cloths. Having taken a vow of poverty like all Jesuits, Hopkins wouldn't have worn the sumptuous damask vestments other priests (that is, other "men of the cloth") might have

enjoyed,[6] but he would have handled damask items regularly in his ecclesiastical duties. Living in Ireland, where linen damask manufacture was a major industry, Hopkins would have been well aware of the role this particular textile played in the nineteenth-century economy, and of the implications of the relocation of linen mills from Dublin to the new "Linenopolis" of Belfast in the north (Johnston "Linenopolis"). Damask—its use and its manufacture—would have been a topic of regular discussion in Hopkins's life.

If "damask" here means damask, then the "beakleaved boughs dragonish" aren't necessarily meant to conjure a scene of a darkening sky seething with demonic creatures. Instead, Hopkins is saying that the dark leaves against the sky *bring to mind the motifs of damask,* of which hooked, pointy leaves and serpentine repetitions are common examples.

[6] Members of the Jesuit Order, "out of a sense of modesty and poverty" (J. Martin, "Father"), do not wear the richly decorated liturgical garments associated with the Roman Catholic Church generally, limiting their wardrobes to a simple black floor-length garment called a *cassock* or *soutane.* Georgetown University archivist Ann Galloway writes that Jesuit-style cassocks "are distinct from the traditional Roman Catholic cassock: whereas the Roman style has a long row of buttons down the front, a Jesuit cassock is more of a wrap with hooks that fasten at the collar, and a belt tied at the waist known as a cincture" (Galloway). Galloway has curated a collection of photos of Jesuits of Hopkins's time on the Georgetown University Library website: https://library.georgetown.edu/special-collections/archives/priestly-fashion-jesuit-cassocks-university-archives.

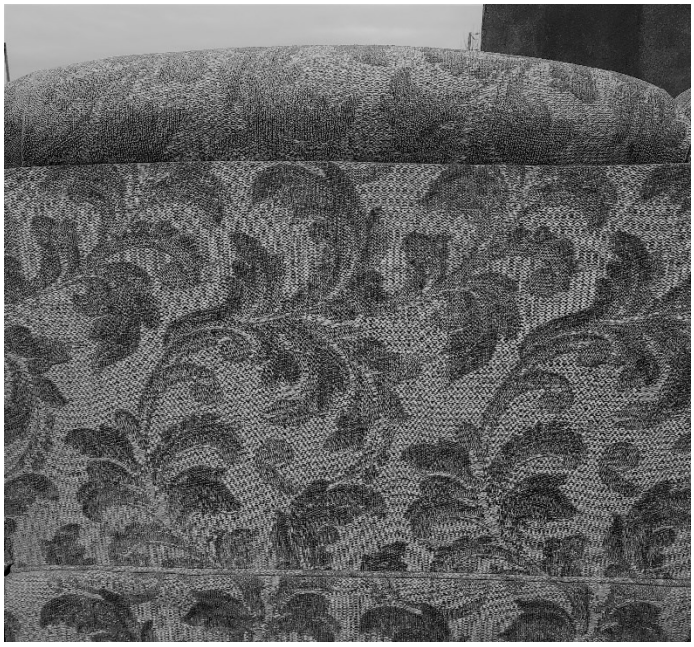

Figure 1: Detail of an abandoned couch, upholstered in a beakleaved, dragonish damask material, photographed near a dumpster on Keane Place in St. John's, October 29, 2021.

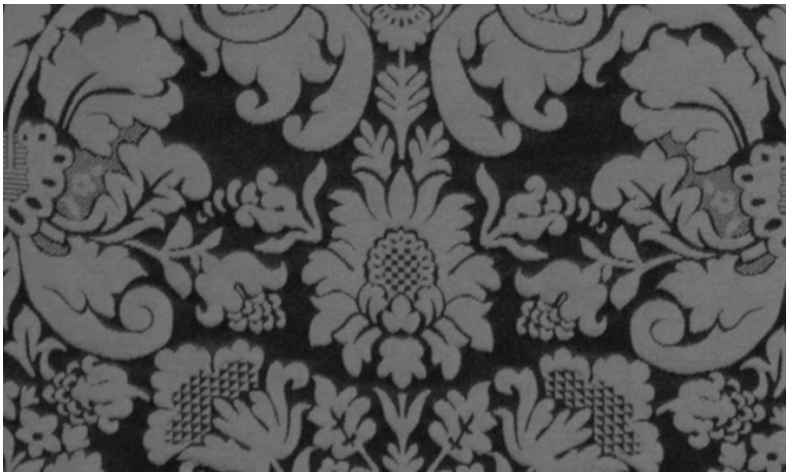

Figure 2: A liturgical damask sample from the website ecclesiasticalsewing.com.

Figure 3: Self-consciously dragonish damask wallpaper in a screen capture from the 2021 Disney special Muppets Haunted Mansion.

Hopkins explains that the boughs "damask the tool-smooth bleak light; black, ever so black on it." I read "bleak" here as meaning "featureless," which is how Hopkins tended to use it; in his prose writings, "bleak" appears as a descriptive term to mean "windswept" or "bare" or even, embracing the word's etymology as meaning "pale," as in the "bluebleak embers" that appear in his poem "The Windhover" (line 13). "Bleak" here reinforces "hoarlight," which, like "bleak light," would be watery and grey; the light left in the east as the sun sinks in the west. The boughs that "damask" the sky are, then, "black, ever so black" against it. The boughs, with their pointy leaves—birch, perhaps? Or poplar?—are silhouetted against the weak light of the eastern sky; they are "ever so black" in contrast to it.

At this point in the poem, Hopkins shifts from a natural motif to a mechanical one, and here's where my "damask as in fabric, not damask as in sword" reading makes a difference. The final five lines of the poem sustain an extended textile metaphor:

Lét life, wáned, ah lét life wínd
Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety | upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck
Now her áll in twó flocks, twó folds—bláck, white | ríght, wrong; réckon but, rèck but, mínd
But thése two; wáre of a wórld where bút these | twó tell, éach off the óther; of a rácк
Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe and shelterless, | thoúghts agáinst thoughts ín groans grind. (lines 10–14)

What can it mean for life to "wínd / Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety | upon, áll on twó spools"? Justin Tackett suggests that the "spools" here can be read as two phonographic cylinders; he argues that Hopkins, like his contemporary Thomas Edison, was "interested in the preservation and reproduction of speech" (150). Tackett identifies several ways he sees this interest playing out in Hopkins's poetry; he includes in these Hopkins's insistence on marking his "sprung rhythm" with diacritics, thereby recording how the work was meant to be read aloud, and in the "audacious enjambment" Hopkins uses in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," which creates an "organizing principle" of "continuity" in the poem (152–153). Tackett likens the marked caesuras in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" to a mechanism that "render[s] the long sonnet navigable, much like tracks on a modern compact disk" (153). I'm not entirely convinced by this argument—it's not really the sort of poem where you can just pick up anywhere and carry on, as you would by flicking between tracks on a CD—but I do appreciate that Tackett links the spools to nineteenth-century technical innovation, because I read that here too. I propose, however, that the technical innovation in question is not the phonograph but another revolutionary contraption: the Jacquard weaving machine.

As a man fascinated by science and innovation, Hopkins would have been well aware of the Jacquard weaving machine as one of the most significant inventions of his time. The Jacquard

machine is a punch-card apparatus that turned traditional looms into what we now recognize as proto-computers, making the production of damask quicker and the product itself more accessible. The relationship between the Jacquard loom and Charles Babbage's (at that time theoretical) analytical engine was well understood by those involved in such discussions; mathematician Ada Lovelace wrote that Babbage's machine "weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves" (qtd. in Forbes MacPhail 140). The "just as" here quite literally means "using the same techniques;" Jacquard's innovation was to translate damask motifs onto coded punch cards which, when threaded onto gears above a loom, controlled the pattern woven into of the fabric. Versions of the punch-card information method would be part of computing well into the 1970s (Da Cruz, *IBM*).

What makes damask unique among textiles is the method by which it is constructed; a pattern is woven into the cloth in such a way that the front and back of the fabric are identical but reversed. In monochrome damask, this means that one side of the fabric will show a satin (shiny) motif against a sateen (matte) background, and the reverse side will have the same motif in sateen against a satin background. In two-colour damask, the colours will be reversed on the front and back sides of the cloth, as will the left-to-right orientation of the image. The Jacquard looms of Hopkins's time were treadle-operated; the weaver would depress the treadle and the warp threads would part according to the pattern determined by the punch-card. The weaver would then pass a shuttle loaded with weft thread between the parted warp threads; as it passed, the warp thread would pen the design. Finally, the weaver would pack the weft threads tightly against one another using a part called a reed. *Part, pen, pack.* As the cloth moved through the machine, it would start its journey as threads wrapped around a horizontal, cylindrical warp beam at the far end of the loom, and finish as a completed textile wrapped around another horizontal cylinder, the cloth

beam, near the weaver's knees.[7] To me, this process sounds very much like what's happening in the lines "wínd / Off hér once skéined stained véined varíety | upon, áll on twó spools; párt, pen, páck." The "once skéined" warp threads connect one "spool" or beam to another, and the weft threads—especially if they are in a contrasting colour —"pen" the predetermined design.

Few critics have taken up the textile metaphor in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," and none that I have encountered have connected the skeins and spools to Hopkins's use of the word "damask" at the beginning of the poem's sestet. One of the rare readers who sees the textile imagery as significant is Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol, who notes it in her 2011 book *Poetics of Luxury in the Nineteenth Century: Keats, Tennyson, and Hopkins.* Tontiplaphol addresses Hopkins's use of the metaphor of weaving, but she doesn't seem to pick up on the specific qualities of damask, or to intuit the presence of the Jacquard loom. She sees Hopkins's world as an "unraveling" one, where "black" and "white", "right" and "wrong" are being wound onto separate spools. She writes, "Hopkins offers an apocalyptic vision of the universe … he does so in a conspicuously raveled text, in a fully realized example of sprung rhythm that mitigates the harshness of his message with luxurious lines densely woven of lettered and accentual threads" (183). Justin Tackett interprets the action of the poem as "the earth's dapple disentangl[ing] apocalyptically in a sunset both literal and metaphorical," and calls it "creation's unspooling" (149). Well, which is it: is creation being spooled or unspooled?

[7]A very detailed technical explanation of this process can be found in the 1888 book *The Jacquard Machine Analyzed and Explained* (Posselt). For a more contemporary introduction to the technology, the National Museums of Scotland website has an excellent short video along with numerous photos of a still-functioning nineteenth-century Jacquard loom ("Jacquard Loom").

If the Jacquard loom is the intended metaphor here, then we are not seeing a cloth unravelling, but rather we are seeing two threads (black and white) "penned" together into one cloth. Hopkins's use of "flock" and "fold" furthers the textile metaphor; both are pastoral terms used as shorthand for "parish," of course, but "flock" and "fold" are also both terms that apply to fabric (a flocked textile has a velvety feel; "fold" is what one does with cloth). "Right" and "wrong" sides are, in damask weaving, identical but reversed, and each is integral to the structure of the other:

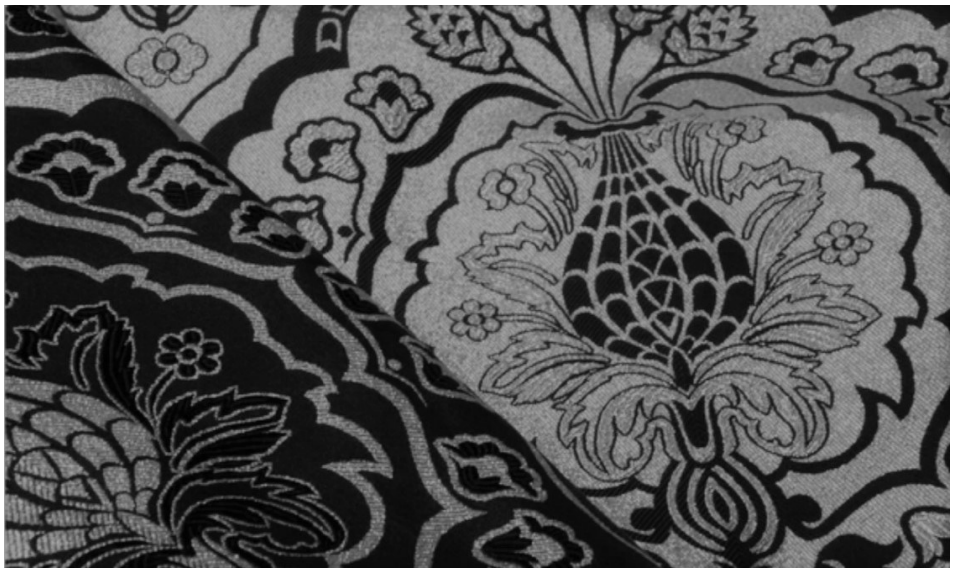

Figure 4: Another sample from ecclesiasticalsewing.com; the image shows the contrasting "right" and "wrong" sides of the fabric.

If the two skeins make one textile, they also make one *text*. Hopkins says, "réckon but, réck but, mínd / But thése two;" to give a reckoning is as much to tell one's story as to settle one's accounts; to "reck" can be to "take heed" or simply to "observe." "Mind *but* these two" (emphasis mine) suggests that "these two"—the black/white, right/wrong pairs—are the *only* things the reader is being advised to mind (that is, to be aware of). If this is a fair reading, then we're not talking about the fabric of reality tangling/disentangling and spooling/unspooling into

two opposing forces; we're talking about the very opposite, where two forces *presumed* to be in opposition are being woven together, *all* on two spools. The two forces, now interwoven "tell éach off the óther; of a rácк / Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe-and shelterless | thoúghts agáinst thoughts ín groans grínd." The "rack" here has been glossed to suggest a torture device (Hampsey 228), but given the preceding images it seems that the "rack" in question is the weaving loom itself, a machine that "groans" under exertion, as machines are wont to do, grinding away to get the job done.

An apocalyptic reading of "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" presumes that the "two flocks," the "black, white; ríght, wrong" are forces in opposition: good and evil, the righteous and the wicked, the saved and the damned. This absolute, binary classification supports the notion of cataclysmic unravelling and division, and this would, of course, be consistent with Hopkins's general belief system as a Christian. In a reading that favours unity and interweaving, then, what might the "two flocks" be? Here, it's useful to know a little about Hopkins's personal and political beliefs. Hopkins was English, a convert to Roman Catholicism who had been raised in a staunchly Anglican family. One of his ambitions was to help convert the English back to Catholicism, to repair the schisms of the past and reunite England with the Roman church; these two Christian flocks, separated by their "reckoning" of theology,[8] were to be woven into one cloth. When Hopkins was sent to Dublin to teach at Cardinal Newman's University College, he was dismayed by his Irish students' and peers' collective commitment to Irish nationalism, and he fiercely defended English rule of Ireland (Muller 75); he was tormented by the existence of these two British flocks, separated by their distinct cultural identities. Hopkins was a convert fixated on

[8] As an aside, the most significant doctrinal disagreement between Roman Catholics and Anglicans has to do with the metaphoricity of transubstantiation: Catholics maintain that the bread and wine consumed as part of the Mass are, in the moment of consecration, *literally* transformed into the body and blood of Christ, while Anglicans believe them to represent Christ's corporeal presence *figuratively*.

converting others; on converting Anglicans to Roman Catholicism, and on converting the Irish to Englishness. Could these frustrations be the "Thóughts agaínst thoughts" that "ín groans grínd" in the poem's final lines? This is a more historically specific reading than the apocalyptic one, and it's no more literal, but I think it makes sense.

Sibyl's/Sibyls

Reading "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" *without* assuming the Sibyl of the poem's title to be a prophetess of doom and destruction opens an entirely new interpretation—and, I believe, a more logical one—of the sonnet. But if "Sibyl" isn't the Sibyl of the *Dies irae,* who is she? As I've said: there were a lot of Sibyls, and they made a lot of prophecies. Many of these were interpreted over centuries as foretelling the rise of the Christian church and the *eschaton*—the apocalypse, or end of creation. In European art, the Sibyls are often represented as bearing scrolls, or posed with books. The sibyl of the *Dies irae* is typically believed to be the Cumaean Sibyl, a favourite sibyl of the Romans, and the sibyl featured in Virgil's fourth *Eclogue.* But the Cumaean Sybil would not necessarily have been the most interesting sibyl for Hopkins. In the classical and medieval literature that would have made up part of Hopkins's Catholic training, another sibyl, the Erythraean Sibyl, was "exceptionally popular" (S. Hopkins 31); her fame was due in part to the inclusion of a lengthy reflection on the Erythraean Sibyl in St. Augustine's *City of God,* a text with which Hopkins, like any other priest and teacher of classical languages, would have been very familiar. Like other sibyls, the Erythraean Sibyl foretells of a cataclysmic *eschaton:*

> Every land, and all the sea and sky, shall burn with fire,
>
> Invading even the dreadful gates of hell.

Salvation's light shall redeem the bodies of the saints,
Though the wicked shall burn in everlasting fire;
Obscurest acts shall be revealed, and each man's secrets told:
So shall God bring the secrets of all hearts to light.

Then shall there be the sound of weeping and gnashing of teeth;
Extinguished shall the sun be, and the dance of the stars stilled;
Our skies shall roll away, and the moon's splendour die;
Upraised shall all the valleys be, and the hills laid low

Until the world of men retains no eminence or high place.
In one flat plain lie all the hills, and the seas
Of blue shall be no more; and the earth perish, broken.
So too, all springs and streams shall be quenched by fire.

(Augustine, bk. 18, ch. 23)

This is pretty standard apocalyptic stuff, and certainly supports the reading favoured by Hopkins scholars. However, the Erythraean Sibyl's tale has a twist: while the poem reads as a description of the "day of wrath" evoked in the *Dies irae,* the poem itself is an acrostic: the first letters of the Greek version of the poem spell out the message JESUS CHRIST SON OF GOD SAVIOR CROSS (Sanidopoulos, "Ethyraean Sibyl"), which is interpreted by believers as a pagan prophecy of Christ's birth. The poem foretells a day of judgment, but the first letters spell a message of love and salvation. The two narratives run perpendicular to one another, each reinforcing—that is, lending structure—to the other. Charmingly, Augustine spends as much time in *City of God* critiquing the nuances of various Greek and Latin translations of the Erythraean

Sibyl's prophecy as he does interpreting the prophecy itself; lines like "I read these first in the Latin language, done into poor Latin verse with bad scansion: defects due, as I subsequently came to know, to the ignorance of their translator, although I do not know who he was," read as though they could have come from Hopkins's letters and journals as easily as from Augustine's.

The particularity of Hopkins's textile metaphor—of a mechanism that creates a "text" where two identical but reversed motifs coexist—and the emphasis on "Spelt" in the title (which I read as "spelled"; "spelt" is consistently used for "spelled" by both Hopkins and Bridges) make a strong case for the Erythraean Sibyl as Hopkins's inspiration. The *Dies irae* is just one story: the tale of the Day of Wrath. The Erythraean Sibyl tells two: the story of God's judgment, *and* the story of God's gift of forgiveness as symbolized by Christ's birth and crucifixion. I imagine that this doubling would have been incredibly attractive to the poet-priest Hopkins, a man of so many dualities.

Thoughts against thoughts

Jack Halberstam writes that "[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2–3). My study of "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" is exactly such an exercise. Rejecting the critical paratexts that have accompanied Hopkins's poem for as long as it has been in print—that is, reading the poem "wrong"—I am able to hold each one of the poet's words, turn it over in my hand, and ask "Why would he pick this one?" "What does this word actually mean?" and, most importantly, "What do I think this word might have meant *to him?"* This is autistic thinking in action. Like Hopkins, I am compelled to touch things that interest me (within the bounds of propriety, of course), and fabrics provide excellent sensory feedback. Like

most autistic people, I have "a predilection for special interests, pursued in an intense, focused way, that have come to be understood as central to the emerging culture of autism" (Straus, "Idiots Savants"). One of these interests which I have pursued intensely is sewing. I was drawn to the word "damask" in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves" because I know what damask is, and because I know it to be a wonderfully tactile textile; the texture is so distinct that someone who works with it often could probably identify it by touch alone (say, if they were losing their eyesight due to chronic illness). That no critic seems to have grasped the significance of "damask" in the poem, and that so many don't even see weaving as the central metaphor, is bewildering to me, but, if precedent is any indication, my fixation on "damask" might be just as bewildering to them.

When Hopkins died of typhoid after a lifetime of navigating other illnesses, his final words were "I am so happy, I am so happy" (R. Martin 413). Imperfect, and no master of himself (as he had previously lamented), his last thoughts were joyful ones. Hopkins's critics have long examined his poetry looking for evidence of his anxiety, misery, and despair, and they have always found it, just as clinicians who examine their autistic subjects for evidence of lack, deficit, and failure, manage to find what they're looking for. As Kövacses suggests, universal metaphors rely on universal embodied experience; universal embodied experience relies on a universal body (or bodymind). For those of us whose embodied (embodyminded) experience falls outside what is believed to be universal, language and meaning fall outside the norm, too. Hopkins ends his poem with, "Thóughts agaínst thoughts ín groans grind." This ending has been read as an expression of torment, and I don't believe this reading is entirely wrong. However, look what readers take to suggest torment: thoughts. Only thoughts, nothing more. Those of us whose minds play tricks on us know that in the end, we can experience "the worst failure of all" and still leave the world saying, "I am so happy, I am so happy."

Chapter 3: Emily Dickinson and the great epistemological project

"You think my gait 'spasmodic'," Emily Dickinson wrote in an 1862 letter to her eventual editor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson (*Letters* 225). It seems to be the second of such letters that Dickinson wrote to Higginson, and one of many letters Dickinson wrote over her lifetime from her little white room in her father's house. Much has been made of Dickinson's seclusion; the poet never married, and lived out her days in her well-to-do family's Amherst, Massachusetts home, where she apparently shied away from company. Dickinson was, and is, elusive. Poet and critic Adrienne Rich writes of visiting Dickinson's house to try to get at some essence of the "real" person behind the figure who has been:

> Narrowed-down by her early editors and anthologists, reduced to a quaintness or spinsterish oddity by many of her commentators, sentimentalized, fallen-in-love with like gnomic Garbo, still unread in the breadth and depth of her full range of work….
>
> (*Essential Essays* 41)

Critics of all kinds have fumbled about trying to get to the "real" Dickinson, be it through her poetry, her letters, or biographical details they have managed to gather together into something like a narrative whole. Adrienne Rich saw her as "a wonder" (*Essential Essays* 41), but Dickinson's first critic, Higginson, opted for much less glorious descriptors, among which was, apparently, "spasmodic."

"Spasmodic" isn't, perhaps, a flattering term to apply to a poetry sample. It is not, however, entirely inaccurate. Compared to the verse of Dickinson's time, and certainly to the often languid poetry of her contemporary, Walt Whitman (of whom Dickinson says, in an earlier

letter to Higginson, “You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but I was told that it was disgraceful”), Dickinson’s lines are halting, fitful, choppy. To bring us back to Rodas’s taxonomy, they are *ejaculatory,* utterances that might be read as “uncontrolled, disconnected, inappropriate, fragmentary, indiscrete, and abrasive” (51). The full paragraph from Dickinson’s reply to Higginson reads: “You think my gait “spasmodic.” I am in danger, sir. You think me ‘uncontrolled.’ I have no tribunal” (Todd 255). The four short sentences could easily be a stanza from one of Dickinson’s poems; swap out the full stops for dashes and line breaks, and the pattern is as twitchy as anything in Dickinson’s notebooks. The rhyme of “danger, sir” and “tribunal” is close enough for Dickinson. The poet offers a spasmodic stanza in response to the charge of writing spasmodic stanzas. “I have no tribunal” is an odd thing to say in this context, unless Dickinson means to say, as we would today, that she is “guilty, as charged.” I read this prose passage (or: poem disguised as prose) as Dickinson’s assertion that when it comes to her writing, she knows exactly what she is doing.

Higginson may have been the first to identify the ejaculatory, explosive nature of Dickinson’s poetic style, but he was by no means the last; in her 2020 book of essays, *Synthesizing Gravity,* American poet Kay Ryan lauds Dickinson’s poetic ebullience, and writes that the poet’s “work is so buoyed by nonsense that it fairly pops out of the water” (30). Ryan’s “nonsense” isn’t quite the same as Leo Kanner’s “‘nonsensical,’ ‘silly,’ ‘incoherent,’ and ‘irrelevant’” utterances (242). For Ryan, nonsense is fully rhetorical; it “exists only in relation to sense. It uses the rules of sense but comes to different conclusions” (30). Ryan here echoes Jack Halberstam’s exhortation to the “subversive intellectual” to “*[p]rivilege the naïve or nonsensical”* (12). Like Ryan, Halberstam understands the nonsensical as something which “may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices” (Halberstam 12). The language of

Dickinson's poems—her "gait"—may be spasmodic, dangerous, uncontrolled, and borderline criminal (that is, requiring a tribunal), but it is intentional and rhetorical.

In her essay called "A Consideration of Poetry," Ryan draws parallels between the work of Dickinson and that of Hopkins; indeed, she is one of only a few critics to do so. *I* find it nonsensical that the resonances between the two nineteenth-century poets have been so consistently overlooked, as they shared remarkable similarities. They wrote during roughly the same decades; neither was published—at least, not widely—during their lifetime. Both poets used highly contested extratextual markers (Hopkins's diacritics, Dickinson's dashes) to manipulate the inflection with which their works were read aloud. Both pushed the boundaries of their preferred poetic forms, Hopkins with his sprawling, long-lined sonnets and Dickinson with her slant-rhymed common measure verses. Both had intense, intimate epistolary relationships with their editors. Both have had their work interpreted as describing same-sex desire. Both wrote about, to, and against a backdrop of religion. Both were dismissed by early readers, only to be embraced as protomodernist prodigies in the twentieth century; Eliot Weinberger, in his preface to Susan Howe's 1985 critical study *My Emily Dickinson,* quotes the "once-important Georgian poet Harold Monro," who called Dickinson "intellectually blind, partially deaf, and mostly dumb to the art of poetry … [h]er tiny lyrics appear to be no more than the jottings of a half-idiotic school-girl instead of the grave musings of a full grown, educated woman" (Howe vii). Monro doesn't just dismiss Dickinson's poetry as, in his opinion, not very good; he pathologizes the poet as deaf and blind, and, most importantly to this dissertation, as intellectually disabled ("half-idiotic") and prone to what we might now call mutism ("mostly dumb"). He throws in some infantilization, too, for good measure.

Today, Dickinson has become somewhat of an emblem of disability in literature, although what that means varies depending on who is doing the analysis. For decades, diagnosticians have claimed to have pieced together explanations for Dickinson's apparent oddness via medical clues extracted from her writing and bits of biographical data, with results that are questionable in both their medical accuracy and their ethical propriety. A 2001 article in *U.S News & World Report,* titled "Much madness is divinest sense: Was Emily Dickinson a genius or just bonkers?" summarizes a study of Dickinson that had appeared in the *American Journal of Psychiatry,* breaking the scholarly work down into easy to understand language: "Not to put too fine a point on it, Emily Dickinson was an emotional mess … [who] suffered from a host of what would today be seen as brain disorders" (Szegedy-Maszak 52). Thirty years prior, John Cody's 1971 psychoanalytic examination of Dickinson concluded that the poet suffered trauma from having been raised by an uncaring and incapable mother. In Cody's estimation, Mrs. Dickinson's purported failures, and the perceived damage they wrought, were all to the greater good: "With reference to Emily Dickinson *the artist,"* Cody writes, "one cannot speak of misfortunes at all. For, amazing as it may seem, Mrs. Dickinson's inadequacies, the sequence of internal conflicts to which they gave rise, and the final psychotic breakdown all conspired in a unique way to make of Emily Dickinson a great and prolific poet" (483). Emily Dickinson's loss, in Cody's estimation, is our collective literary gain.

Author Julie Brown, in her 2010 book *Writers on the Spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome Have Influenced Literary Writing*, makes the claim that Dickinson lived with "brain disorders" one step further. Brown posits that "Dickinson's lyrical poetry marks an important turning point in American literature," a statement with which I think many readers of poetry would agree. However, Brown goes on to suggest that Dickinson's influence on American

literature came not from any kind of deliberate innovation, but from a place of intellectual innocence; Brown writes that Dickinson "moved away from the heavy philosophical poetry that preceded her and led the way toward a more spontaneous, creative style. Her work was unique, passionate, and *child-like, just as she was"* (95; emphasis mine). These dubious claims are the first of many by Brown; Brown states that Dickinson suffered from "dyspraxia (fine motor clumsiness), and her handwriting was so bad she had to clip labels off packages to tape on letters instead of addressing letters herself" (96); "she had problems establishing proper boundaries between herself and other people. As a girl, she was too intense in her friendships with other girls her age, crushing them with her fervent cries for closeness and love" (96); "Dickinson had few interests but she pursued them avidly" (96); "When it came to writing poetry, Dickinson … found the time, the place, and the energy to write poem after poem, gaining confidence and strength every time she picked up her pen" (97). Brown quotes Higginson who, after having spent some time in conversation with Dickinson, wrote that "the impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of something abnormal" (Higginson, qtd. in Brown 102). "That 'abnormality'," Brown asserts, "was Asperger Syndrome" (102).

The editors of a 2013 collection of essays called *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy* certainly don't see Dickinson as moving away from "heavy philosophy." In their introduction, Deppman et al. argue that for Dickinson, "the opposition between poetry and philosophy was not important" (2). They contend that Dickinson's verse demonstrates profound engagement with philosophical concepts; they see in Dickinson an engagement "with the vocabularies, arguments, assumptions, and clashing paradigms that appeared in the philosophical debates in her college town" and suggest that the poet "zigzagged on and off the roads connecting the Scottish Enlightenment, European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and German Idealism." Given what they

see as a clear relationship between Dickinson and philosophical debate, the editors ask, why "this thinking poet from such an exciting philosophical period is so rarely the guest of honor at symposia linking philosophy and poetry?" (3). I would argue that it is precisely the dominance of works like Brown's—equal parts shallow interpretation and biographical fallacy—that have characterized Dickinson as a dreamy innocent, rather than as a fully developed, educated adult who wrote poems like this:

> Come slowly — Eden!
> Lips unused to Thee —
> Bashful — sip thy Jessamines —
> As the fainting Bee —
>
> Reaching late his flower,
> Round her chamber hums —
> Counts his nectars —
> Enters — and is lost in Balms (J211)[1]

and (speaking of bees), like this:

> Because the Bee may blameless hum
> For Thee a Bee I do become
> List even unto Me.
>
> Because the Flowers unafraid

[1] All Dickinson poems in this chapter come from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* edited by Thomas H. Johnson, first published in 1960. The numbering system ("J---") is consistent with Johnson's arrangement (Dickinson, *Complete Poems*).

May lift a look on thine, a Maid

Always a Flower would be.

Nor Robins, Robins need not hide

When Thou upon their Crypts intrude

So Wings bestow on Me

Or petals, or a Dower of Buzz

That Bee to ride, or Flower of Furze

That I may worship Thee. (J869)

If Dickinson is "child-like," then so too must be William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Andrew Marvell, whose influences ring clear in many of Dickinson's poems. Labeling Dickinson's work "child-like" seems, at the most generous, evidence of a superficial reading of the poetry, and, at the most cynical, a case of misogynistic, ableist infantilization.

What did Emily Dickinson know?

Perhaps Brown's most troubling inaccuracy is her assertion that Dickinson had "few interests." In fact, Dickinson was an enthusiastic reader of everything she could get her hands on. Jack L. Capps, in his 1966 book *Emily Dickinson's Reading, 1836-1886,* studiously details all the books, magazines, and newspapers Dickinson is known and suspected to have read, leaving no doubt that Dickinson's interests were far-reaching and that her knowledge on the subjects of her day was kept up-to-date by a steady consumption of literature and periodicals. Capps credits Dickinson's father Edward as having "exerted the greatest influence upon her reading" (11); Edward supplied his children with magazines and books, and was eager to discuss their readings

with them (12). Importantly, while he seems to have been quick to disparage reading he felt unsuitable, he didn't make any real attempt at preventing Emily and her siblings from reading whatever captured their fancy; according to Capps, Edward Dickinson inscribed the books he thought appropriate—the Bible, Huntington's *Christian Believing and Living* and Sprague's *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter* as well as Herndon and Gibbon's *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon* and Mrs. Badger's illustrated *Wild Flowers*—and bought but left uninscribed books he felt, in his daughter's words, would "joggle the mind" (14). The Dickinson family subscribed to many periodicals, which were much loved by Emily and her sister Livinia: *Harper's, Scribner's Monthly,* and *The Atlantic Monthly* were in regular rotation (128). Dickinson's schooling at Mount Holyoke featured a math- and science-heavy curriculum (Moore 46; Mondello 1). Susan Howe writes that Dickinson:

> took the scraps from the 'higher' female education many bright women of her time were increasingly resenting, combined them with voracious and 'unladylike' outside reading, and used the combination. She built a new poetic from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders … Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a 'sheltered' woman audaciously invented a new grammar. (21)

In order to claim that Dickinson had "few interests," one would have to consider the entire epistemological project of the nineteenth century to be *one single thing.* From that perspective, perhaps it could be said that Dickinson *was* only interested in one thing; that thing was *knowing.*

I would argue that if we know anything at all about Emily Dickinson, it's that she was interested in *everything.* She was a polymath and, in terms of her creative output, an autodidact. "Know" is one of Dickinson's most relied-upon words throughout the poems; in his 1964 *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson,* S. P. Rosenbaum counts 230 instances of "know,"

eighty of “knew,” thirty-two of “known,” four of “knowest,” and two of “knowledge.” “Tell” appears 135 times, “guess” twenty-six, “answer” fifteen, “question” eleven, “experiment” ten. “Measure” also appears ten times; “learn” and “teach” eleven times apiece. “Curiosity,” “evidence,” and “inference” each appear seven times. The verb “infer” gets seven mentions, “ascertain” and “comprehend” each get six, “discover,” “ponder” and “speculate” four. I could go on. My point is that, whether Dickinson was writing about love, death, the divine, nature, or current events, she explicitly placed her work within a context of epistemology. What do we know? How do we know what we know? “Brain” appears in the poems twenty-six times, more than “garden” (nineteen), “beauty” (seventeen), or “prayer” (twenty). Whatever else Dickinson’s writing may have been, and whatever she intended it to be, it was unquestionably an epistemological project.

One of the poems on which Higginson was commenting when he attached the term “spasmodic” to Dickinson’s “gait” was “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose.” On the surface, the poem reads like a simple description of a small-town day: the sun came up, it was very pretty, folks went about their business, the sun set. But the lines, in typical breathless Dickinson style, tumble out into a syntactic pile-up:

> I’ll tell you how the Sun rose—
> A Ribbon at a time—
> The steeples swam in Amythest—
> The news, like Squirrels, ran—
> The Hills untied their Bonnets—
> The Bobolinks—begun—
> Then I said softly to myself—

"That must have been the Sun"!

But how he set—I know not—

There seemed a purple stile

That little Yellow boys and girls

Were climbing all the while—

Till when they reached the other side,

A Dominie in Gray—

Put gently up the evening Bars—

And led the flock away— (J318)

The first half of the poem describes a process of reasoning based on sensory experience: the points of steeples against the skyline become visible, the birds sing, and the speaker exclaims to herself, based on the sensory evidence before her, "That must have been the Sun!" But look how the speaker's verbal acknowledgement of the sun's ascent isn't separate from the event itself; rather, it seems to be one of the steps in the sun's rising process; the steeples "swam," in a purplish light, *then* the news spread about the town, *then* the hills emerged from the morning mist, *then* the birds started singing, *then* the speaker said to herself "That must have been the Sun!" The exclamation mark here, aside from the two commas in line three, is the only standard punctuation in the poem. Everything else is dashes.[2] Note, too, that this poem deviates from Dickinson's more typical four-line stanza form (the alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter stanzas known as "common meter" or "hymn meter" that were so popular in Puritan-derived

[2] It would be impossible to do justice to Dickinson's notation style—her dashes—in this chapter; rather than trying to puzzle out their meaning here, I simply work from the assumption that they *do mean* and that Dickinson used them with intention. For an in-depth study of Dickinson's dashes (and other idiosyncrasies of her transcription style), I recommend *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* by Domhnall Mitchell.

religious songs and prayers of Dickinson's time)[3]. The single-stanza form denies the reader even a moment to catch their breath and find their bearings. To return once more to Rodas, Dickinson's lines here embody "the staccato, the interjecting, the eruptive, the abrupt, the telegraphic" (54), and are consistent with "disconnected and burst-style expression [which] is characteristically autistic" (51). "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" reads like a transcription of my own speaking style[4] when I am at my most autistically enthusiastic, clipping my clauses to squeeze in one more essential (to me, at least) detail.

The first half of the poem, then, is a statement of authority: the speaker knows how the sun rose, and she will tell us. The first two lines of the poem offer two possible readings: "I'll tell you how the Sun rose— / A Ribbon at a time—" is generally glossed to mean, "The Sun rose in such a fashion as to appear like slender strips of light appearing in succession." However, "a Ribbon at a time" doesn't necessarily modify "how the Sun rose"; it could belong to "I'll tell you," in which case it can be glossed as, "Allow me to tell you, in one shred of detail after another, how the Sun rose." This, in fact, is what the poem is doing: each of the next four lines (or six, in my reading) gives us a new sliver of information about how the Sun rose. Even the "how" in the opening line has multiple meanings: "how" can mean, as above, *the manner in which* something has transpired, and it can also mean *the cause* of an event's transpiring. How did the sun come to rise? A poet acknowledged it, that's how.

[3] Early editors did insert stanza breaks into the poem, dividing it into four four-line stanzas. Johnson, however, reproduces the poem without breaks; this is consistent with the transcribed version Dickinson mailed to Higginson in 1862, and so I take it as authoritative (Dickinson, *Complete Poems*).

[4] And, too, my eldest daughter's style; when we two are on a roll, we speak to each other almost entirely in clauses and dashes. It's a completely natural and fluid mode of communication for us, but we have inadvertently driven away many unprepared listeners (and overwhelmed family members).

What happens, then, in the second half of the poem? At the poem's mid-point, we have "But how he set—I know not—." Suddenly, the bold declaratives of the first half of the poem—the steeples "swam," the news "ran," the bobolinks "begun"—give way to uncertainty. There "seemed a purple stile—." Our speaker, who had just brought the sunrise into being, can now only tell us how things *seem to be,* not how they *are.* Dickinson's sunset may not be as "dragonish" as Hopkins's vision in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," but it is just as obscure: why are the "boys and girls" climbing the purple style? What movement are the "evening Bars" meant to impede? Is the "Dominie in Gray" a protective figure, or an oppressive one? "Gray" neutralizes all the lovely colour of the days' splendour, but the "Dominie" does put up the Bars "gently," which suggests beneficence. If the speaker is on one side of the bars and the "flock" of boys and girls on the other, then who is saved and who is damned? Jim von der Heydt argues (quite rightly, I believe) that "in saying that she 'know[s] not' how the sun set, [Dickinson] is not saying that she lacks data. What she is missing is confidence. The coming of darkness disrupts metaphor" (111). It is not entirely true that the speaker "know[s] not." It would be more accurate to suggest that she "cannot say;" she can describe what happened, or, at least, she can describe what *appeared* to have happened, but she can't tell us any more than what she thinks she saw. Her speaker can tell you how things started, but she can't tell you how they end, because the end is still a bit fuzzy.

Dickinson is like someone who bursts into a room to tell you she's discovered the meaning of life, then immediately leaves again to take a phone call and, when pressed later, claims to have no recollection of her proclamation. Put another way: the allure of Dickinson isn't just that she lived a life of apparent seclusion—that she was "the fragile poetess in white, sending flowers by messenger to unseen friends … writing, but somehow naively" (Rich, *Essential*

Essays 48). It's that Dickinson always seems like she's keeping secrets from you. Thus, books with titles like Jerome Charyn's *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*[5]*,* and Rebecca Patterson's *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson,* and articles, both scholarly and mainstream, cast Dickinson as a "mystery" or an "enigma." Even Adrienne Rich, despite working to dispel the "legend" of Dickinson that "seemed to whisper that a woman who undertook such explorations must pay with renunciation, isolation, and incorporeality" (*Essential Essays* 49) inadvertently feeds these flames; Rich's essay, "Vesuvius at Home" is placed in a section called "On Lies, Secrets, and Silence" in her *Essential Essays,* edited by Sandra M. Gilbert—a nod, perhaps, to the baseless myths around Dickinson, but a classification which, nonetheless, perpetuates the association of Dickinson with secrecy.

What has been read in Dickinson as secrecy seems to me to really be a simple preference for *solitude.* Solitude and secrecy are not at all the same thing. The fact that Dickinson's verses were found in a trunk after her death has been read as an indication of Dickinson's furtiveness, as though she was hiding her writing from people who had some right to see it; of course, we have no such right. Many of Dickinson's papers (notes, newspaper and magazine clippings, incoming mail) were destroyed upon her death, but the poems, some sewn by Dickinson into "fascicles" but many more unbound, were preserved. As with Hopkins's poetry, the heavy hands of editors initially sought to excise as much of the distracting weirdness from the poems as possible. The verses, all unnamed, were given titles; the signature dashes and wanton uppercases were replaced with more appropriate forms of punctuation and emphasis; the idiosyncratic, breathless grammar

[5] *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* is a 2010 sex romp in which novelist Jerome Charyn writes Dickinson into a salacious narrative, of which the *New York Times* opined, "If Emily Dickinson had wanted to make a spectacle of herself, she could have wandered solo into a disreputable 'rum resort' to sit on the lap of a not-so-gentlemanly scholar, as Jerome Charyn has her do in his daring novel about the Emily who might have been. As we know, she chose a spectacle of a quieter sort, writing poems that never fail to sparkle, prick and unnerve." (James "The Rose")

was standardized. It wasn't until 1955 that the poems were returned to their original state (Dickinson, *Complete Poems* x), or as close to that state as was possible.

Without any real understanding of Dickinson's poetic vision, or of her overall project, critics and scholars have tended to read the pieces as that which they most resemble: discrete poems. Although, to be fair, they don't really resemble discrete poems all that much, at least not poems of Dickinson's time. As mentioned, they were all untitled, which is odd. Much has been made of Dickinson's use of hymnlike meter, but a quick survey of the poems reveals that Dickinson's meter is highly irregular. This is not down to a lack of ability; consider this early poem that appears in Johnson's edition of Dickinson's poems and in Todd's collection of Dickinson's letters, one of the few poems to be published during Dickinson's lifetime:

"Sic transit gloria mundi,"
"How doth the busy bee,"
"Dum vivimus vivamus"
I stay mine enemy!

Oh "veni, vidi, vici!"
Oh, caput, cap-a-pie,
And oh "memento mori"
When I am *far* from thee!

Hurrah for Peter Parley!
Hurrah for Daniel Boone!
Three cheers, sir, for the gentleman

Who first observed the moon!

Peter, put up the sunshine;
Pattie, arrange the stars;
Tell Luna, *tea* is waiting,
And call your brother Mars.
……. (J3)

The poem, written in 1851, goes on for seventeen stanzas, and although the piece is perfectly clever and erudite, it bears little resemblance to the verse Dickinson would come to write even ten years later. I include this poem here to demonstrate that Dickinson was well capable of writing poems that were consistent with the dominant mode of her time, and that the poems she did write in imitation of the dominant style were entirely publishable. If Dickinson had wished to be published, she would have had no trouble reaching that goal; she would have had to simply keep writing what she was writing at seventeen. That is to say: if Dickinson's project had simply been "to be a poet," she could very well have done it in the ordinary way. She had the skill, the education, and the connections. While it might be tempting to see her as failing to follow through on a desire to publish due to timidity, illness, or even madness, as far as I can tell the most rational explanation is that Emily Dickinson simply wanted something else.

Dickinson's poems as epistemological project

I posit that, rather than reading Dickinson in the context of nineteenth-century American poetry and its lineage, we might want to start assessing Dickinson's project as only partially—if at all—a poetic one. She wrote *in verse,* yes, but was what she was writing meant to be seen as poetry (if

it was meant to be seen at all)? I have mentioned that Dickinson was an active reader of the newspapers, magazines, and journals that would have regularly found their way into the Dickinson household, all of which would have borne samples and excerpts of the newest literary writing in America and in England, and which would also have included articles on politics, travel, philosophy, and on scientific breakthroughs. Kaitlin Mondello, in a 2020 article, identifies the work of Charles Darwin in Dickinson's writing, noting that "Dickinson mentions Darwin three times in her later letters in ways that demonstrate her awareness of the impact of his controversial theories, particularly on religious belief" (1) and arguing that "full-length studies of Dickinson catalogue her relationship to nearly every branch of nineteenth-century science" (3). Thomas L. Moore asserts that Dickinson "*read* her mathematics textbooks as passionately as she read *any other genre of literature*—if she encountered therein interesting ideas, concepts, or words that could advance her project, she would (consciously or unconsciously) use them" (45). Moore refers to Dickinson as "both a poet and a mathematician" (65) and identifies "roughly 200" of Dickinson's poems as "mathematical ones" (70).

Moore's suggestion that Dickinson read her mathematics texts as literature makes sense given the range of Dickinson's library and the breadth of subject matter included in her writing; religion, science, mathematics, philosophy, Shakespeare, *The Atlantic Monthly,* baking, and gardening all provide suitable language for poetry. Hierarchies are disregarded, and categories are created based on "what is interesting" rather than "what has been deemed fitting." Throughout Dickinson's body of work we find refusals of easy categorization. Consider, once again, the lines I quoted at the start of this chapter from one of Dickinson's letters to Higginson. The passage's clauses break naturally into the same metrical pattern as do the poems, and the contents are every bit as aphoristic, gnomic, and inscrutable. This is not to suggest that all, or even most of Dickinson's letters were secretly delineated poems, but the slippage occurs

frequently enough to suggest a fundamental disregard for the expectations of form; as with poetry, Dickinson *could* write as instructed and as expected when she wished. That she does not wish to do so indicates experimentation, and a sense of crossover between the modes of communication.

Another example of slippage between genres is suggested by Desirée Henderson in an essay titled "Dickinson and the Diary." Henderson contends "that Dickinson's poems demonstrate that she thought about and positioned her writing against the prevailing conventions of the diary, including the genre's association with memory" (220-221), and she identifies Dickinson as having been "influenced by a cluster of manuscript practices generally classified as women's writing: portfolios, commonplace books, scrapbooks, autograph albums, cookbooks, herbariums, and so forth" (221). The inclusion of "herbariums" in this list is significant. While the keeping of herbaria was not considered a gendered activity in the nineteenth century (Marshall 59), it certainly is now, and this has diminished the value of the herbarium as a scientific document. Zach Marshall recommends reading and teaching Dickinson's poems alongside the facsimile of her herbarium as a means of distancing Dickinson's work from students' preconceptions of the poet. Marshall introduces his students to Dickinson the scientist, a seemingly radical position echoed by Mondello and others.

Dickinson the poet, Dickinson the diarist, Dickinson the mathematician and botanist: all these identities emerge when we place Dickinson in the context of other genres of writing of her time, and each comes from an attempt to make sense of Dickinson's phenomenal, phenomenally weird output. While each of these arguments is compelling, they demonstrate, as much as anything, how awkwardly Dickinson fits our notions of what a poet does and how a poet works. For all that has been done to establish Dickinson as one of the foremost voices of American and

English language poetry, Higginson's question remains unanswered: "what place ought to be assigned in literature to what is so remarkable, yet so elusive of criticism" (Higginson, "Emily" 445). How are we to make sense of someone who approaches an editor by asking "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?" (*Letters* 253).

Defiant Dickinson

It is worth spending some time on Dickinson's initial epistolary contact with Higginson here; Dickinson's fateful letter to Higginson is frequently cited as an example of her odd manner and apparent guilelessness, but the article that prompted the letter—a nearly ten-thousand-word open letter by Higginson in *The Atlantic Monthly*—has not been so closely examined, despite its being nearly as odd as the response it elicited. In April of 1862, Dickinson sent a short letter and four poems to Higginson in response to his "Letter to a Young Contributor," published in that month's edition of the magazine. Dickinson opens with the aforementioned query as to whether Higginson is too busy to tell her whether her verse "is alive," and, two lines later, comments that, "Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude" (*Letters* 253). The oddness of Dickinson's query seems to have bolstered the notion of Dickinson as fundamentally strange, speaking in riddles and incapable of saying what she means. What exactly is Dickinson asking Higginson? As I have said, Dickinson was an educated woman with impressive social connections; if she had wanted to submit her poems for publication, she would have known how to phrase her request appropriately and would have had someone in her circle she could have asked for advice. She isn't asking "would you please consider the enclosed poems for inclusion in a future issue of your esteemed magazine?" She isn't even asking whether Higginson thinks her poems are *good.* She's asking if they are *alive.*

In his editorial, which ran eleven printed pages and which reads more as a rambling manifesto than as a how-to guide, Higginson barrels from one bizarre analogy to the next: the editor who discovers a new and unusual writer is like "the physician who boasted … of having been the first man to discover the Asiatic cholera and communicate it to the public" ("Young Contributor" 570); a magazine that lets a sub-par contribution slip into print praises the entire issue "like a hostess with her tea-making, a spoonful for each person and one for the pot" (571); an editor who has given his approval to a piece of poor writing does not admit his error, but "stands up stoutly for the surpassing merits of the misshapen thing, as a mother for her deformed child" (571); a well-trained editor has "educated his eye till it has become microscopic, like a naturalist's, and can classify nine out of ten specimens by one glance at a scale or feather" (571); the same eye is "carnal, and is attracted to a comely outside. If you really wish to obtain [an editor's] good-will for your production, do not first tax his time for deciphering it, any more than in visiting a millionaire to solicit a loan you would begin by asking him to pay for the hire of the carriage which takes you to his door" (571). These examples are all plucked from the first two pages of Higginson's "Letter." If Dickinson writes to him in puzzles, one can hardly claim that she does so unprompted.

At the mid-point of the essay, Higginson introduces the notion of "life" in a contributor's work; in a paragraph on avoiding tediousness, he writes:

> In addressing a miscellaneous audience whether through eye or ear, it is certain that no man living has the right to be tedious. Every editor is therefore compelled to insist that his contributors make themselves agreeable … [I]t is not necessary to be amusing; an essay may be thoroughly delightful without a single witticism, while a monotone of jokes soon

> grows tedious. *Charge your style with life,* and the public will not ask for your conundrums. (573; emphasis mine)

Later, he writes, "If … you find it your mission to be abstruse, fight to render your statement clear and attractive, *as if your life depended on it:* your literary life does depend on it, and if you fail, relapses into a dead language" (573; emphasis mine).

That Dickinson's initial letter to Higginson may have been somewhat of a performance has been well documented. Baihua Wang speculates that Dickinson's letter serves to deliberately delay Higginson's discovery of the poet's gender; Wang argues that "[i]n order to push back against assumptions Higginson may have had about female artistry and particularly women poets, Dickinson created a genderless or gender-blurring identity in her first letters to him" (91). This doesn't seem to me to ring quite true, as Dickinson's letter doesn't seem particularly un-feminine in its tone. Besides which: Higginson makes a direct entreaty to women writers to contribute work for his perusal, and praises women's writing throughout the "Letter," directly challenging the commonplace that a nineteenth-century woman could only ever publish under masculine pseudonyms; this was Emily Dickinson's America, after all, not George Eliot's England. Poet Robert Creeley, in his 1985 talks on Dickinson, notes a practiced demureness in Dickinson's letters to Higginson and speculates that such a self-representation served to manipulate Higginson's feelings toward the poet ("Lectures"). Critic Richard Brantley invokes another figure of false modesty in his analysis of Dickinson, creating a rather unlikely (and, to my mind, not all that apt) pairing between the poet and the twentieth-century character Miss Piggy:

> One thinks in this connection, albeit whimsically, of an ironic instance of popular culture, Miss Piggy's *'Moi?'* Although the Muppet's rhetorical question poses as her wry self-effacement, her trotter-on-sternum, eye-rolling gesture makes her fans receive her

meaning loud and clear: "Yes, now that I think of it, *'Moi!'* with a vengeance, and, for that matter, *'Me, Myself, and I!*'" (19n)

I appreciate the fun of the high art-low art comparison, but I think it is a misstep (and an apparently irresistible one) to attribute to Dickinson Miss Piggy's coquettishness. If the Dickinson in the Higginson letters comes off as guileless to the point of absurdity, then I believe absurdity *is* the point.

Of all the people to whom Dickinson could have sent her work, why Higginson? As Martin Greenup so plainly states, Higginson's "Letter" is "hackneyed and bombastic" (351), and what he asks of his "Young Contributor" is something Dickinson could not possibly deliver without reverting to her earliest, most derivative verses—the perfectly publishable output of her "Sic transit gloria mundi" years. Dickinson's correspondence with Higginson has been read as sincere and plaintive, but I can't help but see in Dickinson's choices the youthful prankster of Amherst Academy, not so much asking Higginson whether the poems "live," but daring him to tell her that they don't—dashes, exclamation marks, italics and all. She offers Higginson a whole new conundrum: if these verses do everything they shouldn't, then how can they be so very much alive?

At every turn, Dickinson does the opposite of what Higginson recommends: Higginson asks that the contributor make it easy for an editor to decipher their submission, and Dickinson sends him an unsigned letter with her signature sealed within a second envelope. Higginson instructs his reader, "Do not habitually prop your sentences on crutches, such as Italics and exclamation points … Do not leave loose ends as you go on, straggling things … Reduce yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes … Economize quotation-marks … ." Dickinson sends him:

We play at Paste—

Till qualified, for Pearl—

Then, drop the Paste—

And deem ourself a fool—

The Shapes—though—were similar—

And our new Hands

Learned *Gem*-Tactics—

Practicing *Sands*— (J320)

Of the four poems Dickinson enclosed in her initial letter to Higginson – "We play at Paste," "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," "The nearest Dream recedes—unrealized" and "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," none of them comes close to obeying the rules Higginson lays down for his "Young Contributor."

Given Dickinson's analytic mind and sharp eye for detail, it stands to reason that in asking Higginson whether her "verse is alive" she is responding directly to the editor's comments on liveliness; that Dickinson, whose mission was "to be abstruse," should ask such a thing (and to ask such a thing of a somewhat hokey editorial writer who seems immune to his own advice) seems less like an earnest entreaty for approval and more like a bit of a ribbing. After all: this is the same Dickinson who, during her education in absentia from Amherst College, wrote sophisticated satirical letters for Transcendentalist-inspired magazine *The Indicator.* Barton Levi St. Armand, in an article on Dickinson's contributions to *The Indicator,* shares this passage from one of the letters:

> Sir, I desire an interview; meet me at sunrise, or sunset, or the new moon—the place is immaterial. In gold, or in purple, or sackloth—I look not upon the *raiment.* With sword, or with pen, or with *plough*—the *weapons* are less than the *wielder.* In coach, or in wagon, or walking, the equipage far from the man. With soul, or spirit, or body, they are all alike to me. With host or alone, in sunshine or storm, in heaven or earth, *some* how or *no* how—I propose, sir, to see you. (80)

Dickinson knows "putting it on thick" when she sees it, and she surely sees it in Higginson. Can her letter to him really be written in all sincerity? In my reading, Dickinson isn't seeking Higginson's approval, and she's certainly not supplicating for an entry in the *Atlantic*'s index; she's taunting Higginson by sending him the very sort of work he's told his reader not to bother him with. She's also not the audience Higginson is addressing in his open letter: at 31, Dickinson is not a wide-eyed ingenue, but a college-educated woman. In order to believe that Dickinson's volley to Higginson is sincere, and that she means for him to consider publishing her work, we have to believe that either a) she is too oblivious to her own writing to realize that all the poems she's sent do exactly what Higginson has just said *not* to do, or b) she is so arrogant that she believes Higginson's rules don't apply to her. I don't find either scenario consistent with what we know of Dickinson's intelligence or of her character.

Consider, too, not just the "unattractive" stylistic elements of the four poems Dickinson chose to enclose in her letter to Higginson, but also their particular themes. I have already examined "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," but let me look briefly at the other three selections. In Johnson's chronology, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" was written in 1859, and largely rewritten in 1861; "I'll tell you how the Sun rose," "The nearest Dream recedes—unrealized," and "We play at Paste" are dated 1860, 1861, and 1862, respectively. Dickinson would have

amassed upwards of three-hundred poems by April of 1862, and would have had an extensive catalogue from which to select her introductory sample pieces. On first blush, there doesn't seem to be an immediately obvious thematic link between the four poems, but on closer inspection, each seems to be responding directly to Higginson's "Letter." "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" is a riddle, a "conundrum":

> Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
> Untouched by Morning—
> And untouched by Noon—
> Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
> Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone!
>
> Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
> Worlds scoop their Arcs—
> And Firmaments—row—
> Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
> Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow— (J216)

Read one way, the poem describes the human dead awaiting their Resurrection in the post-Judgment future; read another, it just as aptly captures the stirrings inside a flower bulb as an apparent eternity passes from fall to spring. From one angle, it's a poem about death, but from another, it is *charged with life.* It is worth noting that this is one of multiple preserved versions of "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers;" an early version has far fewer dashes, and ends on a full stop rather than leaving the poem "straggling" (Dickinson *The Poems,* 159–164). That is: out of

several viable versions of the poem, Dickinson chose the one that broke Higginson's rules most egregiously as the one to send him.

"The nearest Dream recedes—unrealized" seems like a strange choice of poem to send a potential publisher if one's nearest dream is to have one's poems published; less so if you deem yourself or your work the "Heaven" likened to the "June Bee" that evades capture by the "Boy— / Staring—bewildered—at the mocking sky—." What if Dickinson is, in her way, telling Higginson he should be so lucky as to print her work in his magazine? He seems to eventually come to realize as much, writing in his 1891 piece that "The bee himself did not elude the schoolboy than [Dickinson] evaded me; and even at this day I still stand somewhat bewildered, like the boy" ("Emily" 445). "We play at Paste" seems the most damning: it is a poem of innocence and experience, in which "we" are told that our lives are a matter of taking practice runs at our art until we are ready for the real thing. If Dickinson believes herself to be in the "Paste" phase of her writing project, then the poem reads as an entreaty to Higginson to allow her to move on to the "Pearl" stage by guiding her toward publication. Read differently, Dickinson is condemning Higginson's advice to "Young" writers, accusing him of seeking "Paste" when she's already moved into the "Pearl" stage, something that, like the bumblebee, will evade the editor.

That Dickinson and Higginson went on to exchange letters until the end of Dickinson's life is of no matter here; when Dickinson wrote to Higginson for the first time and sent to him her chosen writing sample, he was a stranger, a name from a magazine to which she subscribed. We can't know what she thought of Higginson and his letter, and we can't know what her intentions were in writing to him, but the general interpretation of the exchange as an act of sincere and earnest entreaty to a "bombastic" magazine editor just doesn't add up. And so, I choose to read this Dickinson as the same Dickinson who was famous in her school days for making people

laugh and for poking fun at convention, and who would absolutely, I believe, take the piss out of Thomas Wentworth Higginson for insulting her intelligence with his "Letter."

"I'll tell you…"

I believe that Dickinson's poems make the most sense when we read them as one big… thing. One lengthy, uncategorized compendium of emotional states, natural phenomena, philosophical queries, spiritual puzzles, medical symptoms. Everything Dickinson knew or felt. Today, we might think of Dickinson's output as falling into the "long poem" genre. Rachel Zucker writes that "long poems are moralistic or kaleidoscopic rather than overarching" ("An Anatomy"); these descriptors apply very well indeed to Dickinson's verse. Perused in its entirety, Dickinson's catalogue of poems circles back on itself, spiraling out from a single point that can only be Dickinson the person. The work is hypnotic and repetitive. After a while, it feels as though one could cut a stanza from one poem and insert it into another without any loss or increase in sense. The Bobolink and Robin appear and come back over the course of decades; Eternity and Immortality appear as characters, but as soon as we feel like we might be getting to the bottom of what they're all about, we meet someone else—a worm, or Death, or the Rose, or a Bee.

That Dickinson's individual poems—once she had established her style—are largely interchangeable has been noted by Steven Winhusen, who, like many others, takes it upon himself to identify what was "wrong" with Dickinson. In the essay "Emily Dickinson and Schizotypy," Winhusen writes that, "while it is a commonplace analogy to read of her 'experimental' use of language, Dickinson's particular style rose spontaneously in late adolescence and remained largely without evolution through the thirty years of her writing career … [T]hese characteristics, while idiosyncratic to Dickinson, fit the well-known clinical pattern of

speech and thought peculiarities of schizotypy" (88). He goes on, "the gift of early and intense creativity attributed to schizotypy matches Dickinson's, and its perseverative nature characterizes her own lack of development over time" (88–89). Dickinson was not, as far as we know, writing for a public, nor was she working with an editor whose advice she took particularly seriously—as her relationship with Higginson progressed, she often thanked him effusively for his feedback, but there is little to suggest that his suggestions made their way into her poems.

What Winhusen does identify is a repetition that carries through Dickinson's writing. Dickinson writes about the same things, sometimes in the same ways, over and over. Assuming that this repetition and lack of linear "progress" is the result of an underlying pathology—that is, that it is involuntary and non-rhetorical—is, I believe, a misstep. Suzanne Juhasz takes a similarly psychological starting point, suggesting that "the compulsion to repeat unconscious conflicts, wishes, and experiences … is due primarily to [the subject's] having remained under repression" (25), and introduces a notion of analogy in which "[r]epetition … is understood not as duplication but creation, using the same elements of the original, constantly destroying or breaking it down and reforming it so that the new form is, in fact, an analogue" (25). Two things stand out for me here: first, the use of "compulsion" in Juhasz's assessment, which again suggests a lack of volition, and which pathologizes the subject; second, the similarity between Juhasz's language around the creation of analogue and Rodas's description of autism poetics as "the joyful breaking down and retooling of conventional language" (to which I have referred previously). What Juhasz's analysis misses is the "joy" part. Juhasz does backtrack a little on her assessment of repetition as a trauma response, writing that:

> [f]or Dickinson this kind of repetition seems less a desire to re-experience … trauma or even to keep to familiar albeit painful experience as it is for the satisfaction or pleasure

> that comes from repetition itself, which for her is the creation in language of experience that is not and never can be the experience of everyday life, be it unconscious or conscious. (28–29)

So even while assuming or projecting trauma in Dickinson's poetry, Juhasz concedes that Dickinson "seems" to be motivated by pleasure gained from repetition. Or, as Rodas might say, quoting Kanner's Donald T., *Dahlia, dahlia, dahlia.* What Juhasz sees as compulsive repetition, I see (through Rodas's lens) as *ricochet,* "language so ridden with stereotypy, so metaphorical, and so idiosyncratically and internally referential that [it] might well be considered indistinguishable from … autistic language" (Rodas 43).

When I think of Dickinson's writing as one project, I don't think of it in terms of literature, but in terms of epistemology—a weird epistemology, but an epistemology to be sure. It is a great, rambling collection, a conservatory of information. The nineteenth century was a grand time of gathering and grouping. In the realm of language, *Roget's Thesaurus*—a marvellously idiosyncratic artifact—was first released to the public in 1852. The progress of what would become the *Oxford English Dictionary* was highly publicized throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century (Gilliver 1). There were the illustrations associated with Darwin's writing, of course, and with advances in the natural sciences. When I think of Dickinson's writing, I think too of the great numbers of scientific illustrations and labeled diagrams that proliferated during her lifetime, and of the great taxonomic projects of the nineteenth century. I go back to Rosenbaum's concordance and Dickinson's use of "to know" and all its cognates and synonyms.

The poet Anthony Hecht, in a 1978 article called "The Riddles of Emily Dickinson" (which, he takes pains to clarify, refers to the riddles Dickinson wrote into her poems and not to the enigma of her person), writes, "it seems to me that one of [Dickinson's] poetic strategies is

the poem conceived of as 'definition,' as a lexicographic undertaking which formulates and identifies" (11). Hecht looks to the poems that begin with a "___ is" formation—"Hope is a strange invention"; "Faith is the pierless bridge"; "Remorse is memory"—and says of them, "These are what I should call exemplary poems of definition, they are solutions to problems of scrutiny or meditation, the answers to riddles, attempts to identify things, and to give those things their identities" (11). Hecht discloses that close examination of his favourite of Dickinson's poems revealed "riddles of identity, of voice, of definition, abounded in her work almost as a technique" (11–12), and brings Dickinson into conversation with three other compendia of riddles: the dictionary, which Hecht proposes as "a sort of assemblage of solved riddles," the Bible, "not only for many an ultimate riddle, but for containing many diverse riddles, themselves richly compounded in doctrine and commentary," and finally the nursery rhymes of Mother Goose, which "are preponderantly enigmatic statements requiring interpretation" (12–13). Three very different sorts of texts, based on different epistemologies, but each dealing with the various questions of life.

In her 2019 book *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative,* novelist Jane Alison writes of becoming "restless with the arc" as narrative structure (15), and of spending nearly two decades seeking other models of telling stories. One could argue that "arc" and "narrative" don't apply to poetry and so don't apply here, but the alternative models Alison finds—spirals, networks and cells, fractals—very much do, and very much apply to Dickinson's work in particular. What if all those herbarium samples, and all those plants nurtured and observed in the Homestead's glassed-in conservatory became models for Dickinson's grand project of answering the riddles of the world, spiraling around a centre point like the Fibonacci spirals that repeat in flowers and trees, and creating a fractal of repetition both within and

between poems? What if, for Dickinson, knowing means passing through the same points again and again, both the points and the knower slightly changed by time? What if this is what she was trying to get at with her trunkful of unbound, unnamed verses; what if they were unnamed and undated because names and dates don't matter in an as-yet unclassified world operating on spiral time? Or what if this *is* classification, and that Dickinson's verses are classified as neatly as any of the world's great collections are: it's just that we don't have the knowledge needed to crack the code, because we are not Emily Dickinson.

Chapter 4: Missed translations: the "stubborn insuspendable lexicality" of Les Murray

If Emily Dickinson was a participant in the nineteenth century's great epistemological project, Murray was heir to its legacy: he was a "kinsman" of James Murray, the Scottish lexicographer and philologist who took on the grand project that would become the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O'Driscoll). The younger Murray, who died at age 80 in 2019 in Taree, New South Wales, might have rivaled the Victorian lexicographer in his capacity to amass words. Growing up as the child of impoverished farmers in mid-century rural Australia, Les had few books at his disposal, but he read whatever he could: "The Aberdeen-Angus studbook, The *Yates Seed Catalogue,* the Alfa Laval cream separator manual, and all eight volumes of *Cassell's Book of Knowledge"* (Tammet 61). By "ten or twelve" he had a "thorough grounding in the Bible, having read it all" (Smith). He also had as a text the enormity of the land on which he rambled daily. Murray was an only child, and he enjoyed his solitude, spending his days engaged in observing the flora and fauna, rocks and weather of the land that surrounded him for miles and miles. As a young man, Murray attended Sydney University, where he discovered the institution's library and within it, amid the encyclopedias and classics, "a yellow row of Teach Yourself language primers" (Tammett 65). Daniel Tammett writes that Murray possessed an amazing "knack" for recall, and a skill for "playing with" the new languages he encountered, "locating rhymes and other patterns, inventing new sentences, freer and more imaginative, out of the authors' dry, stiff examples" (65). In a 2005 interview for *The Paris Review,* Murray said of his younger self, "I was a freak, but happily my freakishness was in language—not, say, in classifying antique crankshafts" (O'Driscoll).

In this chapter, I will examine Murray's poetry as it relates to the concept of translation. Murray's excitement over the "Teach Yourself language primers" of his university days resulted

in him eventually making a living as a translator; it also likely contributed to the development of his poetic voice, which speaks in many different tongues. To explore this notion, I will examine work from three of Murray's collections: *Translations from the Natural World* (1992)*, Conscious and Verbal* (1999), and *Poems the Size of Photographs* (2002). I will also draw from Murray's lecture-turned-memoir, *Killing the Black Dog* (1997; 2009). I lean heavily on an essay on Murray by autistic poet and translator Daniel Tammet, who translated a selection of Murray's poetry into French, and also on work by classicist and parent of an autistic child Kristina Chew, who takes up Walter Benjamin's thoughts on translation and applies them to making sense of her son's fragmentary utterances.

I have mentioned before that Murray is the only one of the four poets I examine in this dissertation who identified publicly as autistic. When he refers to himself as having been "a freak," this freakishness is part of the collection of traits he would come to recognize as autism; Murray referred to himself from midlife on as being "a bit autistic" (Murray and Mares), "mildly autistic" (Murray, *Killing* 22), and "what you might call a high-performing Asperger" (Smith). In his poem "The Tune on Your Mind" in the 2006 collection *The Biplane Houses*, Murray describes the "coin" of his own condition that "took years to drop":

> Lectures instead of chat. The want
> of people skills. The need for Rules.
> Never towing a line from the Ship of Fools.
> The avoided eyes. Great memory,
> Horror not seeming to perturb— (21)

By the time he became publicly known as autistic, Murray's poetry was already part of the literary canon of Australia—and, indeed, of the English-speaking world. Unlike the reclusive Dickinson and the overlooked Hopkins, Murray was a well-known public figure throughout his adult life; he published "some thirty books over fifty years," (Tammet 35) and was at one point invited to draft a preamble to the Australian constitution (Lambert, "Draft Preamble" 7). His recognition of his own autism came as a result of his son Alexander's diagnosis at age three; even before that, however, the theme of autism cropped up in Murray's work. In the 1974 poem "Portrait of the Autist as a New World Driver," a lyrical "we" describes their place in a community many autistic readers might recognize:

> Among the self-taught
> the loners, chart-freaks, bush encyclopedists
> there are protocols, too: we meet
> gravely as stiff princes, and swap fact:
> *Did you know some bats can climb side on?* (*Vernacular* 34)

The autists' charts, their encyclopedic knowledge, and "protocols" point to Rodas's *discretion;* their meeting to "swap fact" is Rodas's *ejaculation* and Easton's "infodump formalism." These categories—discretion and ejaculation—are among the most prominent modes of autistic language usage in Murray's poetry.

The lyric "I" doesn't appear in the poem until the last third; before that it's "we" (the gang of autodidacts whose grave and stiff interactions are the "flat affect" of which the diagnostic material on autism makes such a big deal) (Stagg et al. 704) and a second-person "you" that stands in for an "I":

Under the overcoming

undiminishing sky you are scarcely supervised:

you can let out language

to exercise, to romp in the grass beyond Greek.

You can rejoice in tongues,

orotate parafundities.

When the poem's "you" is left "scarcely supervised"—that is, unobserved, unperceived—their language embodies (envoices?) the pleasure a dog or a horse would show when let out to stretch its legs; words like "romp" and "rejoice" appear. The phrase "orotate parafundities" is a linguistic invention of Murray's. "Orotate" seems to me to be a portmanteau of "orate" and "rotate" (perhaps meant as a thought-rhyme for *orbit*), with an echo of "ululate" thrown in for good measure. "Parafundities" suggests para-profundity—something adjacent to depth—or perhaps *paradoxical* profundity: an unexpected significance found in the day-to-day. All these things resonate with autistic experience, but Murray was only peripherally aware of the finer points of autism as a phenomenon when he wrote the poem. Asked in a 2009 interview about this prescient appearance of an autistic poetic subject, Murray says that "even if I didn't know how to apply the word autistic, the intuition was there" (Smith).

Being "difficult"

Despite Murray's candor in his later years about his autism, few writers have analysed his writing through an autism lens, and certainly not through a critical autism studies lens; a 2022 doctoral dissertation by scholar Amanda Tink appears to be the first in-depth analysis of Murray's work not as coincident to his autism, but as thoroughly imbricated with it (Tink). For the most part,

when Murray's autism has been mentioned by critics, it has tended to be in the context of explaining or excusing Murray's apparently aberrant behaviour, or of softening the blow of some plainspoken commentary delivered publicly by Murray without adequately civil couching. Aside from Tink's recent study, the only significant writing thus far on Murray as an autistic poet—and as a poet *of* autism—has been by Daniel Tammet. I will return to Tammet at some length later in this chapter. First, I would like to reflect on the ways in which critics have used the language of both autism pathology and autistic pleasure to describe Murray's poetry (and, often, Murray himself).

In a 2021 essay, Tony Ratcliffe uses an awkward, but telling, metaphor of bingeing and purging to describe Murray's writing style. Murray, Ratcliffe writes, has a "tendency to indiscriminately absorb almost everything immediate and distant, and then to regurgitate it in a novel manner" (Ratcliffe). Murray is, for Ratcliffe, a sort of literary bulimic. Note that Ratcliffe doesn't say that Murray "eats" or "consumes" the material indiscriminately; he absorbs it, passively, like a towel or a sponge or a rolled-up newspaper left overnight on the front lawn. The process is involuntary and, as such, arhetorical. The language of indiscriminate consumption and expulsion makes this a metaphor about disordered eating,[1] but metaphors of consumption and expulsion relate to autism, too; in Ratcliffe's formulation, Murray's poetry is clever word-vomit—an ejaculation of another kind—made up of words and facts that have been absorbed without any intention on Murray's part. What is the "regurgitation" of words "in a novel manner" if not echolalia? Ratcliffe's suggestion, no matter what kind of admiration is behind it, is

[1] There is another level of meaning (and, I would suggest, insult) to the metaphor. Murray was, throughout his life, a very large man; he wrote and spoke extensively about the cruel comments he received during his school years regarding his body size, and about the impact of that cruelty. Nevertheless, interviewers and critics habitually described Murray's physical appearance in disparaging terms: a 1997 article from *The Observer* begins, "When Les won a poetry prize, the press spluttered (Aussie moron!). He splutters too (it's rage and talking with his mouth full). But don't scoff: the sad fat man's made it big in English Literature…" (Billen).

fundamentally dehumanizing. As Marion Quirici writes regarding the rhetoric of autistic savantism, "[i]f autistic genius is a mere quirk of the abnormal brain, the autistic person herself or himself is not credited with the development of her or his talents" (73). To return once more to Grace from Werth et al.'s study: just as Grace is denied subjectivity by the assertion that her comedic formulations are some sort of trick or naturalized response, so too is Murray denied subjectivity when Ratcliffe reduces his catalogue to the result of passive input and involuntary, ejaculatory output of data.

I can almost forgive Ratcliffe his distasteful metaphor, because elsewhere in his essay he comes within a hair's breadth of recognizing—and celebrating—Murray's autistic mode of engagement with the world. Ratcliffe writes, "It is clear that in writing he puts no barriers, no defenses, between him and the world around him." Ratcliffe's assessment of Murray here is uncannily close to Elizabeth Fein's definition of autism as "a form of permeability, of deep existential vulnerability, to the order of things around us: structured systems, elements in their robust relations, arrangements both deliberate and disavowed" (130). Ratcliffe writes that "it is with non-judgmental humility that Murray describes the material world, natural and man-made: he does not like ranking one thing better than the other," and then reiterates his point, positing that "[Murray's] poetry implicitly says: absolutely anything can be written about—it is all the same, anyhow." Here, he echoes (unwittingly, no doubt) philosopher Erin Manning's proposal that "autistic perception" be understood as "an opening, in perception, to the uncategorized, to the unclassified" (41). Murray's "aloofness" and "fragmentary language" (Ratcliffe) are part of his poetic expression, yes, but "aloof" and "fragmentary" are also words that have been used as coded descriptions of autistic ways of being for a very long time.

It is probably fair that critics have largely avoided insinuating that Murray's poetry might be informed by his autism; I imagine that few non-autistic reviewers or scholars would feel qualified to ask whether a link exists between the poet's neurological difference and his poetry. However, a wealth of proxy words for "autistic" have been deployed in the assessment of Murray's writing: the work "seems indecipherable" (Ratcliffe), the poems are "never exactly intimate and often patrolled by details and place-names nearly indecipherable to an outsider" (Chiasson); the "verse-lines … dance on the verge of unintelligibility" (Feddersen 102). The poet is "cryptic," and his poems are "impenetrable" (Batchelor); he "employs an alien's view of earth that can produce some astonishing imagery" (Mitchell, P.). These notions—the poet as alien or outsider, poetry as incomprehensible—are not exclusive to Murray and his work by any means. But the characterization of Murray as *not like the rest of us* is so common that it bears examination: is he that much more alien than other poets? Is his poetry that much more difficult than everyone else's? To Daniel Tammet, Murray's poetry doesn't seem that bewildering; indeed, Tammet finds in Murray a sort of home, a shared set of experiences and interests. Like Tammet, I don't find anything particularly alienating about Murray's poetry at all; the poems aren't experimental, but neither are they rigidly formal; the vocabulary is extensive, but the poems are usually syntactically clear, or at least clear enough that the meanings of unfamiliar words can be intuited through their context. Why, then, is "difficult" a label so often applied to Les Murray's poetry?

I can't help but wonder whether it's Les Murray's poetry that readers find incomprehensible, or Les Murray himself. From the start of his career in the 1960s until his death in 2019, Murray was known to be irascible, curmudgeonly, and perpetually on the wrong side of both poetic fashion (he loathed Modernism) and social mores (he was a convert to Roman

Catholicism and a merciless critic of the Australian arriviste intelligentsia, and his opinions on multiculturalism were conspicuously out of step with his time). Les Murray didn't make sense: he said the sort of things a conservative would say about "militant feminism" (*Killing* 24–26) and yet he wrote tenderly about the plight of women against patriarchal oppression; he mashed together the local vernaculars of the settler farmers and Indigenous peoples he loved with the florid, latinate words of the intellectual elite he claimed to hate; he felt a profound, nearly worshipful connection to the natural world of Australia, and yet he vehemently opposed environmentalist movements. He hated protests and demonstrations, likening political chants to the schoolyard taunts he endured in his youth (*Killing* 64–65). He was a world-famous poet who consistently chose for his author photos not professional portraits, but in-situ snapshots credited to his wife, Valerie. As Janet Kenney writes, acknowledging Murray's autism (and giving us one more example of how this autism was read by others), "He eccentrically combines the deceptive simplicity of the idiot savant with the sophistication of the academic scholar and the introspection of a saint. Add to these a farmer, a son, a parent and a husband and you have at least understood a fraction of the complexity that adds up to Les Murray the poet" (Kenny 60).

Rather than make Murray an everyman, these contradictions make him "difficult," "incomprehensible," "unintelligible." Poet Paul Mitchell, in his review of *The Biplane Houses,* focuses on "The Tune on Your Mind" and its apparent admission of autism. Mitchell writes:

> Here Murray appears to acknowledge the fact that he suffers from a condition that is likely to have made a strong contribution to the Les Murray that many in Australian literary circles (and beyond) have viewed as a caustic and relationally difficult man. The poem, while not an apology, appears to offer at least an explanation for his personality

traits. It documents a moment of self-awareness and in so doing becomes an act of sharing. Some, however, may see the poem as merely offering excuses. (Mitchell, P.)

Autism, of course, is nothing to apologize for, but Murray was indeed prone to unpleasant public outbursts which did warrant addressing. In *Killing The Black Dog: A Memoir of Depression,* originally published in 1997 and then expanded and re-released in 2009, Murray enumerates the many times his emotional struggles, which he understood as depression, had driven him to behave in a way he felt required an apology. He recalls an incident that occurred when he was invited to give a lecture at his former high school, "the very place where the Black Dog had lain buried." His fellow speakers "on the themes of social handicap" spoke "in dignified terms of rejections overcome and satisfactions attained"; Murray, by contrast, found that when his turn came to speak:

> my pain got the better of me, flowing down the years from the mid-fifties into my voice and my posture, causing me to accuse and whine . . . It was an early, failed attempt at something I'd have to do internally before I could risk it again in public: a close questioning of past trauma . . . A talking cure rather than a chemical one, but not according to the pre-cut schema of Freud, and not talking to another, but to myself.
>
> (*Killing* 13)

Ultimately, for Murray, the "Black Dog" from which he suffered was brought to heel by two things: first, writing poetry, and second, his near-death experience in 1996 when an acute liver abscess resulted in a ten-day coma, after which Murray felt that the Black Dog had left him altogether, "dismissed" by the "sheer euphoria of survival" (31). He was wrong about that, as he confesses in the afterword of the 2009 edition of *Killing the Black Dog:* as the 1990s drew to a

close, he felt the "atmosphere and themes" of his depression creeping back. Although not as all-encompassing as they had been pre-coma:

> at times they would send symptoms as bad as any I'd suffered. The returning illness would once again shoot crippling arrows into my life, keeping me from literary occasions, making me swear on TV, causing me to blaze up or wizen at any challenge. I was made to remember who still owned the game. (31)

Murray's descriptions of his depressive episodes are harrowing, and I can't help but wonder how a poem about his autism could be seen as offering more of an explanation—or more of an excuse, depending on one's perspective—than the memoir of nearly ten years earlier could. Even without the factors of depression or autism, the traumas Murray endured as a child—extreme poverty, even compared to other mid-century farmers of his region; his mother's death due to haemorrhaging as a result of a miscarriage when Murray was twelve years old, and Murray's father's grief and guilt for decades afterward; late-childhood and teen years of social alienation, miscommunication, ostracization, and abuse—would be enough to make sense of anyone's bursts of rage and politically questionable positions.

Ratcliffe writes that "Murray the man is hard to distinguish from the work" but he doesn't explain why this should be more the case with Murray than with any other poet. As with Kanner's research subjects, the pronouncement of Murray's indecipherability doesn't seem to match up with the reality that Murray's work is entirely decipherable *if the reader is willing to engage meaningfully with it.* Ratcliffe admits this as well, saying that "the longer we stay with Murray's poetry, the more we see that it is not the result of randomness, as first thought, but intense purpose . . . that we readers could not decipher in the earlier stages of acquaintance." To

decipher is to translate; translation of a text takes time, patience, and intimacy. The task of the translator is a difficult one.

For theorist Kristina Chew, translation is an essential concept for understanding autism. In her 2013 essay, "Autism and the Task of the Translator," Chew writes about her minimally speaking autistic son Charlie, and shares her approach to making sense of his gnomic, fragmented utterances. Chew is a classicist, trained in the putting-together of scraps and fragments, and in interpreting meaning from small amounts of data. Chew writes that, "[l]ike poems written in a dead language, the communications of 'nonverbal' or 'minimally verbal' autistic people—including Charlie—are routinely perceived as so difficult to decode that they verge on the untranslatable and unknowable" (305). Chew rejects this notion, and takes on the task of "Representing Charlie via Sappho." Chew explains that when she teaches Sappho, she and her students approach a fragment of a poem knowing that what they have to work with is only a fraction of what Sappho has actually written; with Charlie, Chew "reads" his verbal texts from the position that she, like her classics students, is witness to only a small portion of what Charlie means to say. "[K]nowing how to read poetry for its sonic, rhythmic, and musical qualities has aided my understanding of what Charlie is trying to tell me and of autism more generally" (308). Listening to Charlie "involves tuning my ear to the sound of his language, his idiom" (308–309).

Surely, Les Murray's poetry isn't as difficult to decode as are fragments of Sappho, or the repetitive, coded utterances of Kristina Chew's young son. Much of the difficulty in Murray is presumed to come from his reliance on Australian vernacular; Ratcliffe suggests that Murray makes references that are "closed to all but those who have lived in the Australian state of Queensland" (Ratcliffe), while Janet Kenney writes that the "private language" of Murray's poems is a private language to which many Australians feel they have the key" (60). Does this

mean that the perceived difficulty in Murray's work is simply a matter of his global readers not having access to an Australian glossary? This seems like a dramatic simplification. Although Murray was claimed—later in his career and after his death, especially—as a poet of place, his work was far more cosmopolitan than that, and the Australian vernacular was only one of the many languages from which he grabbed his words. Helen Lambert, writing about Murray's 1992 collection *Translations from the Natural World,* argues that Murray's poems

> regularly go beyond the strictures of place, and … might seem, were it not for Murray's radical transformation of the English language, to be perfectly translatable, meaningful or 'present.' … Murray is newly made, not as a poet of place or meaning, but as a poet of translation—a poet who translates the uncertainty and foreignness of his own language and of language itself." ("Australian Language Forest" 45)

Daniel Tammet writes that he found Murray's poetry both easy to decode and very challenging to translate. On first blush, the lives of Daniel Tammet and Les Murray couldn't have been more differen: Tammet grew up the eldest child of nine children in 1980s London, while Murray was an only child who grew up in rural Australia in the 1940s. Yet, what Tammet sees in Murray is a sameness. Reflecting on his childhood, Tammet writes that his own English "had never been the English of my parents, siblings, or schoolmates; my sentences—oblique, wordy, allusive—had led to mockery, and the mockery had caused my voice to shrink. But Murray's was sprawling; it held a hard-won ease with how its words behaved" (*Every Word* 57). Tammet muses that if he had known earlier that Murray was autistic like him, "I might have seen myself differently" (57). Tammet had first read Murray's poetry in a bookshop in 2000, just prior to his own autism diagnosis (55). "It was the first time I read a book from cover to cover while standing in the shop," Tammet writes (55). "The word pictures were vivid and felt right . . . Murray's patent

delight in language, his fascination with it, matched mine. He wrote like a man for whom language was something strange, and strangely beautiful" (56). For Tammet, the sharing of this love for language and the sharing of a neurodevelopmental condition amount to the same thing.

Tammet would eventually work closely with Murray, and would come to think of him as a friend. Tammet's essay, "The Poet Savant," from his 2017 book *Every Word is a Bird We Teach to Sing,* details Tammet's process of finding Murray's poetry, befriending the poet via international post, and eventually translating a selection of Murray's work into French. Tammet examines the difficulty of translating poetry in general, and the particularly exquisite difficulty of translating Murray, a poet whose register shifts mercurially within and between lines, and whose vocabulary is informed as much by the vernacular language spoken in his home country as by chosen favourites from Hindi, Gaelic, Polish, German, Yiddish. The essay that emerges becomes a sort of autistic close reading in two languages as Tammet attempts to replicate not just the poems' semantic meanings, but their sonic ones as well.

Murray gave Tammet carte blanche in terms of selecting which poems to translate. When Tammet made his selections, there was one favourite he left out: Murray's "It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Fifteen." The poem, which was included in Murray's 1996 T.S. Eliot Award-winning collection *Subhuman Redneck Poem* and then reprinted in Murray's *Learning Human: Selected Poems* in 1998, is a description of Murray's son Alexander, or rather of Alexander's autism; autism is the "It" of the title. A section reads:

> He has forgotten nothing, and remembers the precise quality of experiences.
> It requires rulings: *Is stealing very playing up, as bad as murder?*
> He counts at a glance, not looking. And he has never been lost.
> When he ate only nuts and dried fruit, words were for dire emergencies.

He knows all the breeds of fowls, and the counties of Ireland.

He'd begun to talk, then resumed to babble, and silence. It withdrew speech for years.

When he took your hand, it was to work it, as a multi-purpose tool.

He is anger's mirror, and magnifies any near him, raging it down.

It still won't allow him fresh fruit, or orange juice with bits in.

He swam in the midwinter dam at night. It had no rules about cold.

He was terrified of thunder and finally cried as if in explanation *It - angry!*

He grilled an egg he'd broken into bread. Exchanges of soil-knowledge are called landtalking.

He lives in objectivity. I was sure Bell's palsy would leave my face only when he said it had begun to.

Don't say word! when he was eight forbade the word 'autistic' in his presence.

(*Learning Human* 178)

"It's a very powerful poem," Tammet recalls in a 2017 documentary podcast, "and precisely for that reason I didn't translate it. It was just too powerful for me … The autism is not the one that I had, but at the same time there were points of similarity, of course" (Johnson, M.). Tammet found the poem too intense, "so intense, it was a little bit like when I would go to the cinema and feel overwhelmed by a film's images, and the emotions conveyed by the images." He also found the poem familiar, and says, "I could understand it, whereas a lot of other readers, people I showed it to, didn't." The intimacy Tammet felt kept him from entering the work as a translator until he was asked by Murray himself to do it as a favour so it could be shared with the audience at a reading in Paris.

Speaking Lyrebird, speaking Tick: *Translations from the Natural World*

The poems Murray wrote to help wrest himself from the jaws of the Black Dog would become the 1992 collection *Translations from the Natural World.* These poems were Murray's attempt to shake himself out of his humanness; "I gave my stupid self a rest and tried to enter imaginatively into the life of non-human creatures and somehow translate that life into human speech," he writes in *Killing the Black Dog,* by way of explaining what led to *Translations from the Natural World* (*Killing* 14). Murray describes *Translations* as having been written "when I was really badly off in my head. Sick of myself. I didn't want to hang around with myself. So I'd imagine myself out of my head, into the lives of other creatures. I did it for several months. It was good" (Smith). Interestingly, Murray at his most depressed is also Murray at his most Hopkinsian; consider Murray's poem, "Lyre Bird," a thirteen-line sonnet from *Translations,* which begins:

> Liar made of leaf-litter, quivering ribby in shim,
> hen-sized under froufrou, chinks in a quiff display him
> or her, dancing in mating time, or out. And in any order.
> Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder,
> I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo (*Translations* 21)

The tumbling alliteration, the inventive formulation of "quivering ribby in shim," the compounds "leaf-litter" and "aeon-sent" are absolutely an echo of Hopkins, of whom Murray said, "He taught me how to do baroque diction, how to melt language and model tableaux in it" (Smith, "A Conversation"). In the landscape (and soundscape) of Australia, the lyrebird is a master mimic, known for its uncanny skill at replicating the sounds of other animals and of humans. The lyrebird has even been known to copy non-animal noises. In a sense, the lyrebird is an embodiment of echolalia; its language is nearly entirely composed of sounds cribbed from its

surroundings. Could there be a more apt animal symbol for the autist or for the poet (or especially for the autistic poet)?

I kink

forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, I link

cattlebell with kettle-boil; I rank ducks' cranky presidium

or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim. (*Translations* 5–8)

Helen Lambert writes that "[i]n Murray's rendition of the lyrebird, language becomes almost solely performative: the poet mimics the sounds of the bird and thus moves further towards the creaturely, and further away from an attempt to communicate meaning" ("Australian Language Forest" 51). I agree that Murray's language here shifts toward the creaturely, but I don't follow Lambert's logic that this move toward the creaturely signals a move *away* from communication of meaning. In nature, the lyrebird's mimicry signals many things, chief among which is sexual availability; is this not communication? (I could argue, perhaps cynically, that signalling sexual availability has been a poetic motivation in humans for as long as there has been poetry.)

A bit of a lyrebird himself, Murray speaks "as" these parts of the natural realm by adopting voices from elsewhere in the poetic world. He reveals his debt to John Donne in a poem called "Shellback Tick," which seems to serve as a sort of translation of Donne's "The Flea" into an Australian setting.[2] Donne's poem is spoken by a man trying to convince his beloved to submit to his sexual desires on the grounds that their bodily fluids have already been mingled within the body of a passing, and ultimately squished, flea:

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,

[2] Murray once said, "I admire Donne for the mathematical, almost tile-making exactitude of his patternings and reversals. He is like a Muslim wall decorator" (Smith).

Where wee almost, yea more than maryed are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;

Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,

And cloystred in these living walls of Jet. (lines 10–15)

Murray's poem is spoken from the perspective of the shellback tick, also known as the Australian paralysis tick. A bite from Donne's flea is more or less harmless (plague-carrying potential aside); a bite from Murray's tick releases dangerous toxins into the human bloodstream. And while the subject of "Shellback Tick" is exclusively Australian, Murray chooses here not to highlight the Australian vernacular, but instead gives the poem's speaker a much more Jacobean tone:

so the curdy reed

floodeth sunhot liquor the only ichor the only

thing which existeth wholly alleyechoing

duple rhythmic which same of great yore

…….

of plaque I dissolve with reagent drool

that doth stagger swelling's occult throb. (*Translations* 40)

Murray may be speaking *as* the shellback tick, but he is writing *in the language of* John Donne. The link isn't all that hard to follow: tick -> flea -> Donne. That Murray populates Donne's wink-nudge poem of wooing with a venomous insect makes sense when we consider that Murray believed through much of his life that love -> sex -> death; for decades, Murray was convinced that his mother's death had been his fault, and that difficulties around his birth had resulted in her

repeated miscarriages, a neurosis which followed him for decades (*Killing* 21). The shellback tick of the poem isn't the shellback tick; it's Murray at his most calmly neurotic.

Readers and reviewers have taken it as fact that Murray is doing here what he says he's doing: translating the natural world into English—or into Englishes—and making the thoughts and stories of the animals that populate his landscape available to those of us who don't speak Lyrebird or Tick. Merle Marianne Feddersen, in an article called "The Zoopoetics of Les Murray: Animal Poetry, Attentiveness and the More-Than-Human World," writes that "[i]nstead of depicting the nonhuman animal as a passive, observable object or rendering it invisible through metaphorization in order to contemplate the human condition [*Translations from the Natural World*] boldly gives a voice to a remarkably diverse selection of animals, nonhuman others who inhabit, shape and transform both nonhuman and human spheres" (90–91). But, of course, Murray doesn't really speak Lyrebird or Tick either; his poems impose a narrative onto these animals, and he creates a voice for them that he feels suits. Unlike with a translation from one human language to another, there's no way for a reader to verify that Murray has represented his animal subjects accurately. Murray's poems in *Translations from the Natural World* may demonstrate his attentiveness too, his admiration of, and even a profound connection with the rest of the web of nature (and I consider, for better or for worse, the *human* here as part of the natural world), but they do not translate an animal's thoughts or feelings to us. They may be heavily sonic and onomatopoeic, but they are not transcriptions. I would hazard to call them "projections," especially given that they are the product of Murray's "talking therapy" with himself. The lyrebird "speaks" like Hopkins because the lyrebird is the part of Murray that is most like Hopkins; the tick "speaks" like Donne because Donne associates his flea with sex and Murray grew up associating sex with death. Feddersen may see Murray's poems as "challenging

anthropocentric binaries" (91), but I see them as more akin to the phenomenon of autistic masking.

Autistic masking—increasingly known as "adaptive morphing"—is "the conscious or unconscious suppression of natural responses and adoption of alternatives across a range of domains including social interaction, sensory experience, cognition, movement, and behavior" (Pearson and Rose 53). Masking is often likened to other forms of code-switching, but many autistics (myself included) feel that this comparison isn't entirely apt; to me, adaptive morphing feels much more like the camouflaging techniques associated with cephalopods such as the mimic octopus—creatures that involuntarily (so far as we know) alter their colour, texture, posture, and movement patterns in response to a threat (real or perceived). It is an instinctual, not a cognitive, behaviour. As Wenn B. Lawson writes in the 2020 article "Adaptive Morphing and Coping with Social Threat in Autism: An Autistic Perspective," "[p]eople's responses to a perceived threat can be … fight, flight, freeze, flop, drop, fawn and possibly morph. Social exclusion can be a strong and visceral perceived or actual threat" (521). Social exclusion was a theme of Murray's life—it was, indeed, the subject of the talk at Taree High School where he experienced his public breakdown.

If Murray's poems in *Translations from the Natural World* are translations, they are not *from* the natural world so much as *through* it. They are not—and this should probably go without saying—translations of any conversation Murray might have had with the animals and plants and organs thereof for which the poems are named. Murray may have insisted that writing these poems was his way of getting away from himself, but of course, in most of our traditions, *there is no getting away from the self.* This is not to suggest that the poems are failures, or that Murray somehow set out to deceive his reader. I don't believe Murray's motivation was to challenge

anthropocentric binaries or to advance any kind of ecological imperative. One interesting phenomenon of autism is that the process typically called "unmasking"—that is, the reduction of one's reliance on adaptive morphing—tends to involve a sort of "going back" to a time prior to the onset of the masking, and this often involves participating in child-like pastimes (playing with sensory toys, returning to favourite books and programs from childhood, etc.). Perhaps *Translations from the Natural World* is, for Murray, this return to a mode of existence that was less deleterious to his well-being. It only makes sense, then, that this process should involve the poet's explaining himself to himself using the models that would have surrounded him in his early life of rural rambling.

Anger's gone: *Conscious and Verbal*

In 1996, a variety of E. coli infection caused Murray's liver to abscess to the point of rupturing, and the poet was hospitalized for three weeks—"The only poet whose liver // damage hadn't been self-inflicted, / grinned my agent," Murray remarks in "Travels with John Hunter" (*Conscious* 17). Murray considered his illness to have resulted in a shift in consciousness. Asked in a 1997 interview whether his depression had been "Replaced by the joy of surviving," Murray replied, "Not only that, but a new sort of enjoyment of the whole damn thing, of life and family and normality and sanity and energy." Murray continues, explaining to his interviewer that "Anger's gone. I feel better for having gotten rid of it. It's an awful thing to have around" (Billen). The experience seemed to bring to the poet a new humility, especially in regard to the function of poetry: "I used to say, 'I don't believe in using poetry as therapy.' But I tell you, if you get sick enough you'll use anything you've got as therapy. I used poetry as a kind of plunger to dip up old bad stuff and examine it" (Smith).

The title of Murray's 1999 collection, *Conscious and Verbal,* is certainly a reference to his having survived the medical emergency of three years prior, but it also seems to me to be a comment on *Translations from the Natural World,* in which the poet had imposed human consciousness and the capacity for verbal communication on animals and plants. *Conscious and Verbal* differs dramatically in tone from much of Murray's earlier, more palpably angry work. In the collection, Murray spends a lot of time explaining himself. "Travels with John Hunter" begins:

> We who travel between worlds
> lose our muscle and bone.
> I was wheeling a barrow of earth
> when agony bayonetted me. (*Conscious* 16)

The opening here feels Dantean: the speaker may not announce himself as being midway into life's journey, but he is journeying, carrying a load of earth from one point to another, then "bayonetted" in what we will learn is the liver, an organ that rests at the halfway point of the human torso. The lines of the poem, too, are bisected, the breaks aligning with each syntactic unit's clauses. Agony is the physical pain that struck Murray and landed him at John Hunter Hospital, but agony is also what he had been living with for decades; the "barrow of earth" he had been wheeling through life could easily be read here as the trauma of his early years. As Murray writes in the opening paragraph of *Killing the Black Dog,* his depression reached a new acuteness when he relocated his family from Sydney back to his childhood home community of Bunyah: "at last I was going home, to care for my father in his old age and to live in the place from which I'd always felt displaced. What I didn't know was that I was heading home in order to go mad" (1).

In contrast to *Translations from the Natural World,* which seems primarily an exercise in trying on voice, persona, and form, *Conscious and Verbal* is a collection that is *about* things. "Travels with John Hunter" offers a précis of the event that altered the course of Murray's life and vanquished his depression (or, so he believed at the time). A number of the poems are about poetry, or about the writerly life; "The Instrument" begins:

> Who reads poetry? Not our intellectuals;
> they want to control it. Not lovers, not the combative,
> not examinees. They too skim it for the bouquets
> and magic trump cards. Not poor schoolkids
> furtively farting as they get immunized against it.

It continues:

> Why write poetry? For the weird unemployment.
> For the painless headaches, that must be tapped to strike
> down along your writing arm at the accumulated moment.
> For the adjustments after, aligning facets in a verb
> before the trance leaves you. For working always beyond
>
> your own intelligence. For not needing to rise
> and betray the poor to do it … (*Conscious* 24–25)

What is intriguing in this poem on the writing of poetry is just how prose-y—how *undifficult*—it is. The poems Murray wrote for *Translations from the Natural World* were filled with sonic pyrotechnics; this reads more like the technical writing Murray would have translated for money in his twenties. None of which is to say that it isn't an excellent poem: it is, but its approach is

wholly different from the one Murray employed when translating himself through assorted wildlife. If *Translations from the Natural World* was Murray explaining himself to himself, *Conscious and Verbal* seems to be Murray explaining himself to someone else; someone who doesn't have access to Murray's private book of weird knowledge.

The dramatic difference between Murray's emotional well-being during the writing of *Translations from the Natural World* and that of *Conscious and Verbal,* and the stylistic differences between the two collections, suggest to me that what Murray had understood as a lifting of depression might actually have been a recovery from "autistic burnout." In a 2021 paper, Mantzalas et al. explain that the concept of burnout "originated within organizational psychology to describe the state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion that develops over time from job-related stress" (53) *Autistic burnout* is distinct from occupational burnout in that it comes not from the stresses of the workplace, but from the stresses of everyday life: the sensory overstimulation, the pressures to suppress stimming and other characteristic traits, the frustrations that arise from communication mismatches. Mantzalas et al. quote an informant who says that, for autistic people, burnout can be ''an integral part of … life … that affects us pretty much from the moment we're born to the day we die, yet nobody, apart from autistic people really seem to know about it" (53). Autistic burnout happens when the expectations placed on an autistic person outweigh their capacities and supports; it is a "highly debilitating condition characterised by exhaustion, withdrawal, executive function problems and generally reduced functioning, with increased manifestation in autistic traits—and distinct from depression and non-autistic burnout" (Higgins et al. 2356). Significantly, the condition is frequently misdiagnosed as depression (2358). While Murray refers to his mental ill-health exclusively in terms of depression, the depression he describes seems more consistent with autistic burnout than with depression in the

general population. He writes that none of the medications prescribed for depression had the desired effect on him; "Not Tofranil, not lithium, not Prozac, none of them" (*Killing* 9). He does eventually find relief, however, in Lovan, the drug his autistic son had been prescribed to help him control his rages in early adulthood. Murray writes, "No antidepressant drug had ever helped me, but I was assured Lovan was safe—and within weeks my acrophobia and nearly all of my regular low-grade gloom were gone" (36).

To me, *Translations from the Natural World* reads as an expression of autistic burnout (mis)translated as depression, and *Conscious and Verbal* as an expression of post-burnout reprieve. The language and manic density of the poems in *Translations* seem autistic to me in an obvious way: they are perseverative, they morph from voice to voice, they adopt accents, they mask, they stutter, they stim and tic. The language in *Conscious and Verbal* reads as autistic to me, too, but not in the same way: *Conscious and Verbal* is a collection of poems by a poet who wants to make himself clear. The poem "Prime Numbers" begins with the one-line question, "What are you doing now, Les?" which is followed by six eight-line stanzas in response. "The Water Plough" is a three-page description of the methods used when farmers "had to scoop out the silt / and stinking slop from a dam / or you'd have a paddy, not a pond" (46). In "The Great Hall of Chlorine," Murray expounds for two pages on contemporary Australian race relations. The poems are emotionally restrained, a little pedantic, and very tidy.

New hieroglyphics: *Poems the Size of Photographs*

In some ways, *Poems the Size of Photographs* is more about the act of translation than is *Translations from the Natural World.* In the 2002 collection, Murray begins with and returns to the idea of the pictograph: a symbol that does not emerge naturally, but which is created to

replace language, or to transcend it, or to unify in spite of differences within it. In *Poems the Size of Photographs*, Murray layers code upon code, describing and explaining that which is meant to be communicated *without* description or explanation; if a pictograph is meant to distill a concept down to its most essential meaning, then what does it mean to put it back into words? The collection balances between the two poles of *Translations from the Natural World*-style explosive wordplay and *Conscious and Verbal* -style restrained, detailed instruction. As previously mentioned, it opens with a poem about translation: "The New Hieroglyphics" describes the symbols that make up "the World language." "World," Murray writes, "can be written and read, even painted / but not spoken" (3):

> The effort is always to make the symbols obvious:
> the bolt of *electricity,* winged stethoscope of course
> for *flying doctor.* Pram under fire? *Soviet film industry.*
> …….
> Sun and moon together
>
> inside one is *poetry.* Sun and moon over palette,
> over shoes etc. are all art forms—but above
> a cracked heart and champagne glass? Riddle that
>
> and you're starting to think in World, whose grammar
> is Chinese—terse and fluid. Who needs the square—
> equals—diamond book, the *dictionary,* to know figures

led by strings to their genitals means *fashion?*

just as a skirt beneath a circle means *demure*

or a similar circle shouldering two arrows is *macho*

All peoples are at times cat in water with this language

but it does promote international bird on shoulder.

This foretaste now lays its fork and knife parallel. (3–5)

This universal language of symbols Murray's speaker proposes is, of course, ridiculous; Murray lists invented symbols for abstractions like "poetry" and, possibly, "heartbreak," and leads us to "cat in water," which most of us can interpret as "angry" or maybe "panicky" (or "panic-angry"?) then to "international bird on shoulder," which is likely "peace" but who's to say for sure it's not "piracy"? The final line of the poem points out how absurd an endeavour all this has been: laying one's fork and knife parallel means either that you've finished eating, or that you haven't, depending where in the world you are, what angle you've left your fork and knife pointing, and whether your fork tines are pointed up or down. The symbol is too full of different meanings—even opposite ones—to be "obvious."

Is it any wonder Tammet was so taken with Murray from the moment the young Englishman opened *Poems the Size of Photographs* in a bookshop in Kent? Can there be anything more relatable to an autistic—especially to one not yet diagnosed—than highlighting the absurdity of the language we're all *supposed* to understand? For Tammet, the images in Murray's poems "felt right." When asked in an interview what "getting it right" meant to him, Murray replied:

> What does some phenomenon in the world mean? What does it lead to, what does it point to, what deeper dimension can you find in it? I do a lot of that, and I think of it as contiguous to what science does: working a thing out. Seeing its less obvious connections. Surprising yourself … Sometimes you just want to play around and find musical, surprising stuff to say. (Smith, "A Conversation")

I think this sentiment is ultimately what's at work in all Murray's poems of translation, whether that's translation of the self in language that moves us through an animal experience, or translation of the experience of near-death into something the rest of us can understand, or whether it's the recognition that all translational code is only comprehensible to some of us, and that others have to try our best to find the connections and make them make some kind of sense.

If there is one poem in *Poems the Size of Photographs* that brings together all these threads that make up Les Murray the poet (and, let's brazenly venture, Les Murray the man), it might be the eight-line "Worker Knowledge," which I include here in its entirety:

> The very slight S of an adze handle
> or broadaxe handle are cut off square.
> When adzes stopped licking timber ships
> They were stubbed to scrape rabbit-trap setts.
>
> But the worker's end of a felling axe
> where the tapering upsweep levels down
> to bulge, is cut slant, to the shape
> of a thoroughbred's hoof pawing the ground. (44)

It is tempting to read Dickinson in here—the word "slant" worked into a tetrameter quatrain must be meant to evoke the Belle of Amherst, surely. Murray's poem is far less abstract than Dickinson's are, though; "Worker Knowledge" is rooted in practice, not in a philosophical or theoretical musing on what happens to adzes when they are no longer needed. "Worker Knowledge" is a statement of class loyalty: Murray's father's family cut timber and attended to the world with callused hands. The sounds are pure ricochet: the assonance of "licking timber ships," and the lullaby meter of "But the worker's end of a felling axe / where the tapering upsweep levels down," may not announce themselves like the lyrebird-level echolalia of *Translations From the Natural World,* but they are part of the same sort of language practice. The comparison of the shape of the truncated (and therefore newly useful) axe handle to the shape of a horse's hoof is straight out of the autistic world of infinite connections, of seeing patterns where others don't. Note that Murray doesn't invoke a workhorse here, but a racehorse; "thoroughbreds" are tempestuous beasts bred for speed, not well-behaved animals built for hauling wood. "Percheron" or "Clydesdale" would have worked fine, metrically, so why "thoroughbred"? Because a thoroughbred's hooves are dainty, unlike those of their labourer cousins. The choice suggests a beauty beyond mere utility; indeed, the slender, gently curved handle of a felling axe is a beautiful object, and does resemble the proportions of a racehorse far more than it does a workhorse. While a ploughing breed might have made more sense thematically, "thoroughbred" is a more accurate comparison.[3]

[3] It is worth noting that thoroughbred racing is an incredibly popular spectator sport in Australia; there are dozens of racecourses in New South Wales alone. According to the website Aushorse, "The Australian thoroughbred breeding industry is the second biggest in the world and operates in every state and territory, with many of the larger commercial farms situated in NSW's Hunter Valley," a roughly two-hour drive from Bunyah.

Translation and source

Several of the critics I have cited in this chapter have invoked Walter Benjamin's formative text, "The Task of the Translator," and with good reason; Benjamin argues for a complex and nuanced relationship between translated poetry and its source text, claiming that "[a] real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully" (22). I believe that this is what Tammet tries to do in his translation of Murray, and what Chew tries to do in her translations of her son Charlie, and I think it's what Lambert believes Murray is attempting in *Translations from the Natural World.* Given the role translation played in Murray's professional life, and given the frequency with which the poet used translation as a trope, this makes perfect sense.

I think there is another sense in which "translation" can be applied to Murray, though: not the linguistic sense, nor the Benjaminian one, but the geometric one. In geometry, to translate a figure is to move all of that figure's points on a graph so that the figure is reproduced perfectly in a new position. For Benjamin, translation is *not* reproduction, but in geometry, translation means that the figure is reproduced exactly, only in a new spot. The new position creates a new context; the figure's placement in relation to the x and y axes of a graph, and in relation to any other figures or points on that graph, changes everything. This, too, is a kind of visual echolalia; a triangle *means differently* when it is above the x axis than when it is below it. The lyrebird's call means something different in the context of Murray's poem than it does in the bush; the curve of an axe handle *means differently* when it is juxtaposed against "thoroughbred" than when it is juxtaposed against the idea of a woodshed or a forest.

Chapter 5: Anne Carson, *Short Talks,* and the poet as spectre of autism

In this chapter, I wish to do two things. First, I wish to examine the ways that the idea of autism has been projected onto (and, indeed, weaponised against) Canadian poet Anne Carson; second, I wish to examine Carson's 1992 poetry collection *Short Talks* using the "autism poetics" criteria established by Julia Miele Rodas in *Autistic Disturbances.* My aim is to illustrate a contrast between what non-autistic people think autism looks like (based on detached observation), and what autism *feels like from the inside.* I will analyze Carson's poem "Short Talk on Autism" on its own, and then I will look at *Short Talks* as a collection and explain how it, from my perspective as an autistic person, captures and expresses autistic experience. As I mentioned in my introduction to this dissertation, I chose to include Carson in this research because of how deeply *Short Talks* resonates with me as an autistic person. Few books—even books specifically about autism—embody autism in both form and content the way *Short Talks* does. I don't assume that this was Carson's intention; in 1992, so little was known about autism that it would be preternatural to set out to, and succeed at, producing a collection of poems that so brilliantly captures the autistic spirit. And yet, I can think of no text that does a better job of illustrating how it feels to communicate autistically, with all such an idea entails.

In the opening poem (aptly titled "Introduction") of *Short Talks,* Carson writes,

> I will
>
> do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task
>
> of a lifetime. You can never know enough,
>
> never work enough, never use the infinitives
>
> and participles oddly enough… (23)

This passage could be a companion to Les Murray's "Portrait of the Autist as a New World Driver." Like Murray's "self-taught … bush encyclopedists," Carson's speaker craves knowledge; Carson's claim that that one can never "use the infinitives / and participles oddly enough" resonates with Murray's claim that when left unsupervised, one can "rejoice in tongues, / orotate parafundities" (*Vernacular* 34). Murray demonstrates the joyful language hacking that Rodas identifies as a characteristic of autistic expression, and Carson describes the drive to perform such hacking. It is indeed the task of a lifetime, not just in the sense that one could spend one's whole life span engaged in it and never finish, but also in that it is a calling, a vocation: the task to which one must dedicate one's entire life. For Carson's speaker, doing "anything to avoid boredom" doesn't mean taking up sky-diving or other high-octane pastimes; it means learning more, working more, and playing around more with syntax. Languaging weirdly is a prophylactic against stultification.

This passage from Carson reminds me of another favourite text of mine: Steve Martin's film *L.A. Story,* which was released on VHS (and into my teenage consciousness) around the same time *Short Talks* was published. "Wacky Weekend Weather Guy" and sometime performance artist Harris K. Telemacher (Martin) suggests to visiting British journalist and eventual love interest Sara McDowel (Victoria Tennant) that a tour of Los Angeles would be a better use of their day together than would a one-on-one interview; Harris concedes, however, that an interview with him "would be fascinating, because of the interesting word usements I structure." For most of high school, I had the phrase "because of the interesting word usements I structure" written in permanent marker on a piece of poster board tacked to my bedroom wall, along with another quotation from *L.A. Story*: "Bored Beyond Belief," which Harris traces with his finger on the steamy window of his Los Angeles apartment. I have been deploying both phrases, with varying degrees of appropriateness, for thirty years as part of my own echolalic

idiolect. Using infinitives and participles oddly, structuring interesting word usements: these have always been a mode of play for me, and a way to insert some excitement into life's more tedious moments.

The things that thrilled me—and to which I related—about Martin's comic, surreal, intertextual romp through L.A.[1] are the same things that have thrilled me about *Short Talks* since I first read it in my twenties. Its formal repetition—forty-five prose poems, all titled "Short Talk on…"—makes it predictable and, to a reader like me, comforting. At the same time, the collection constantly reinvents itself by changing tone, changing references, changing its sense of urgency. It does anything to avoid being boring. *Short Talks* is funny, erudite, mercurial, slippery, and, if we evaluate it against Rodas's criteria, a thoroughly autistic text.

I am not the first person to connect Carson with the phenomenon of autistic expression. She has, herself, approached "coming out" as autistic; in a 2015 round-table discussion for *Art Forum* promoting a production of Carson's translation of Sophocles's *Antigone,* Carson responds to choreographer Trajal Harrell's description of his emotional experience of the play, by saying:

> I came at the plays from studying them in school to learn Greek. To me this is all distant. Listening to Trajal talking about his emotions I understand it, but I don't feel that when I write the plays—and very rarely when I see the plays. It's partly that I'm a semi-autistic person [laughter], but it's also just that that's not how I went about it; I cared about the grammar more than the feelings. (O'Neill-Butler)

[1] In a favourite scene of mine, actor Rick Moranis plays a gravedigger, prompting Sara to recite Hamlet's "I knew him, Horatio" speech; the skull in question is not Yorick's, but belonged instead to The Great Blunderman, a clown Harris had studied under years ago. Another grave in the cemetery is marked as being the burial site of William Shakespeare, much to Sara's bewilderment.

It is unclear from the transcription whether the bracketed laughter is Carson's alone, or whether the other members of the discussion laugh, or whether everyone laughs together. Carson describes herself as "a semi-autistic person" as a way of explaining her lack of emotional attachment to the play she's produced and to the performance that has come of it; she "cared about the grammar more than the feelings." Carson's remark is meant, I believe, to be lighthearted—in prefacing "autistic" with "semi-," Carson distances herself from autism as a (perceived) psychiatric condition, suggesting that she embodies some of autism's more choice characteristics (a stronger interest in ancient Greek grammatical construction than in emotional tropes) without being wholly autistic.

Of course, a person cannot be "semi-autistic" any more than they can be, as the old joke goes, "a little bit pregnant." Autism's classification as a spectrum disorder has resulted in a widespread misunderstanding of autism as something that exists between two poles: "profoundly autistic" on one end, and "mildly autistic" on the other. This linear interpretation of "spectrum" relies on what are called "functioning labels" in autism discourse; these low/high, severe/mild labels create scales which "fail to capture the varying day-to-day capacity of Autistic people's ability to respond to and manage the demands and responsibilities of adulthood when faced with sensory stimuli, environmental stressors, communicative differences and health challenges" (Bradshaw et al. 105). Any one autistic person may be "high functioning" in a specific area at one moment, and "low functioning" in the same area under different circumstances. For example, I am capable of articulate speech most of the time, but not always; as I age, I feel my access to spoken language becoming less and less reliable. Current conversations around the autism spectrum tend to favour the "colour wheel" model to the linear spectrum one; autistic researcher Claire Jack proposes a "pie chart" model, where the "slices" of a circle correspond to different

autistic characteristics like sensory sensitivity, attachment to routine, executive functioning issues, and so on (Jack). An autistic person's difficulties in different areas are charted across the circle, giving a more robust and nuanced picture of their experience of autism. Rather than falling somewhere on a spectrum that runs from "low" to "high," the autistic person has their own unique and variable spectrum profile.

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that Les Murray described himself as "a bit autistic" and "mildly autistic," but his modifiers were chosen, I would speculate, to differentiate his experience of autism from that of his more significantly impaired son, rather than to distance himself from the condition. Whether Anne Carson identifies as autistic is not, ultimately, all that important here; I point to this comment merely to affirm that Carson is likely aware of the fact that other people *read* her as autistic. I use *read* here for two reasons: firstly, because I, like many other readers, see Carson's writings as (to return to Rodas's and Yergeau's assessments) rhetorically autistic, and secondly, because I believe that Carson herself has been turned into somewhat of a text by both admirers and naysayers. Unlike Les Murray, Carson dislikes interviews and grants few of them, favouring the prepared lecture or public talk; this means that few moments with Carson are candid, and so to engage with Carson is to engage with a version of Carson that has been rehearsed, curated, and mediated largely by Carson herself.

The poet as autistic text

In a 2001 issue of the now-defunct magazine *Books in Canada,* poet, critic, and then-associate editor of the magazine David Solway slings the word "autistic" at Carson, employing it as an insult in his essay, "The Trouble With Annie." "Are we really impressed or edified by so autistic a

performance?" Solway asks, in reference to a poem called "That Strength."[2] Solway reads Carson's stylistic fragmentation in "That Strength" as mimicking the technical habits of poet Paul Celan; he interprets Celan's style as "founded in [Celan's] grievous and alienating exposure to the Nazification of his beloved German Sprache, a truly demonic encounter of which Carson has no comparable and validating experience" (Solway). Rather than asking what in Celan's horrific experiences might spark a connection between the work of Carson and of Celan, Solway argues that Carson's incorporation of Celan's style is an act of appropriation and trickery. That is, Solway accuses Carson—not the poem, but the poet herself—of communicating in a way that he feels she has not earned. Celan has suffered enough for his language to have become fragmented; Solway sees no suffering in Carson, and so he sees no reason why she should be allowed access to such a mode of expression.

As far as Carson's poetry goes, "That Strength" doesn't stand out as particularly good; it doesn't share the wit, the intriguing allusions, the formal interventions, nor the shifting of tonal register for which Carson had become known by the turn of the millennium. It's a short piece; I quote it here in full:

> That strength. Mother, dug out. Hammered, chained,
> dislocated, weeping, sweeping, tossed with its
> groaning, hammered, hammering bolts
> off death. Shaken and damming

[2] "That Strength" is included in Carson's 2006 collection *Decreation;* Solway doesn't cite any source for the poem, but he might have come across it in a 1996 issue of *Parnassus: Poetry in Review.* While Solway may have chosen for any number of reasons to analyze "That Strength" rather than one of the poems in Carson's full-length collections, his focus on poems from journals rather than from published collections seems strategic. Early-career poets typically publish exclusively in journals; by focusing on a poem that ran in a journal years prior to Solway's article, while ignoring Carson's five full-length collections (including *Men in the Off Hours,* for which she would win the 2001 Griffin Poetry Prize), Solway mischaracterizes Carson as an emerging (read: young) poet. Like Solway's use of "Annie" to refer to Carson in the article's title, this seems a deliberate act of infantilization.

stars. Unjudgeable. Knife. Un

breakable on grindstones

that strength,

Mother

Broke. (“That Strength”)

I’m no expert on Celan, and so I don’t have the tools to detect him here; I do, however, read echoes of Hopkins in Carson’s “Hammered, chained, / dislocated, weeping, sweeping, tossed with its / groaning, hammered, hammering bolts / off death.” Perhaps Hopkins is among the many poets whose habits Carson has adopted over her career. It is just as likely, though, that because I have become attuned to Hopkins, I see him everywhere; perhaps Solway is attuned to Celan, and so sees him everywhere, and in everything. Solway asks, “Are we really impressed or edified by so autistic a performance?” in reference to Carson’s purported act of poetic forgery, but the same question could be directed toward anyone who interprets the world through the filter of their own fixations.

Solway sees the autistic characteristics of Carson’s writing, but he can’t make the leap as to why Carson might employ these tools of communication, and he can’t imagine that there is any sort of intention behind Carson’s choices (unless the intention is to defraud readers and critics). Solway’s essay is steeped in his distaste for Carson, and he makes no effort to temper his disgust. However, he does manage to do an excellent job of pinpointing what it is that makes Carson’s poetry *feel* autistic:

> A major reason for her surging popularity may have something to do with the current obsession with fragments and simulacra … It is, in effect, a poetry of screws, hinges, dowels, thin linear splines and sharp corners, a line from Akhmatova here, a soupçon of

> Celan there, little bits of Beckett and Bataille, a dollop of Plato, a generous helping of Keats, all put together according to a blueprint from Sappho. What we are getting is a poetry whose composition is a function of shrewd outsourcing and subsequent importation for the mechanical assembly of parts … Between what is expropriated, what is borrowed, what is parallel, what is synchronous, what is shared and what is reminiscent, *there is scarcely an original line or thought to be found in any of her work.*
>
> (Solway; emphasis mine)

We are in the realm of ricochet here, and also in the realm of the automaton, thanks to Solway's liberal use of machine imagery. Carson's assembly of other poets' bits and parts is not motivated by emotion; it is "shrewd" rather than inspired or reverent. By comparing Carson to a machine, Solway invokes another classic trope: the autistic person as robot. We see this trope in Les Murray's poem "It Allows a Portrait in Line Scan at Fifteen," with Murray's son who "likes Cyborgs. Their taciturn power, their intonation" (*Learning Human* 178). If Carson's poems represent "the mechanical assembly of parts," then Carson is not so much a robot herself as the builder of robots.

Just as Solway's critique extends beyond Carson's poetry and onto Carson herself ("I say this unabashedly: she is a phony, all sleight-of-hand, both as a scholar and a poet"), I analyze both Carson's text *and* Carson *as text* in an attempt to expose just what it is that triggers such an outsized reaction in Solway.[3] By "Carson as text," I mean that I will analyze Carson as phenomenon, a phenomenon to which Solway objects *and* to which he contributes via his

[3] And in other critics. Canadian poet Michael Lista, for example, asked in a 2016 article in *The Walrus,* "Is Anne Carson the Only Poet With More Fans Than Readers?" While his language is less incendiary than Solway's, Lista's indictment is the same: that Carson isn't a very good writer, and that those who appreciate her work don't know any better. "In a weird way," Lista writes, "Carson may be just as representative of our own time and of her main readers: arts and humanities graduates with more student debt than talent" (Lista).

objection. The phenomenon I call "Carson as text" is informed in part by things Carson has said, done, and written, and even more so by things others have projected onto her. It is my belief that Anne Carson *as phenomenon* has come to occupy a cultural space not unlike that of autism *as phenomenon.* When Solway derides Carson's poems as "glib imagistic non sequiturs," he echoes Leo Kanner's descriptions of his subjects' "irrelevant utterances." The "narrative flatness [that] stretches interminably" of which Solway complains sounds very much like the "flat affect" so often observed in autistic subjects (an affect Carson certainly presents in the many available recordings of her talks and lectures). Solway is not wrong in identifying Cason's signature "stringing together of disjointed locutionary tagmemes," but I disagree that this formal quirk of Carson's "does not in itself deserve serious inspection."

Many might argue that Solway's skewering of Carson, first in his *Books in Canada* review and then later, in even more excruciating detail, in his 2003 collection of critical essays, *Director's Cut* "does not in itself deserve serious inspection." Solway's vitriol toward Carson and her readers feels embarrassingly disproportionate; Solway seems so angry, in fact, that I can't help but ask whether the root of his anger has anything to do with Carson at all, or whether Carson is just a convenient target—an academic, a woman, someone with no declared allegiance to any Canadian scene or school of poetry—for a more nebulous anxiety about relevance. In an essay called "Anne Carson and the Solway Hoaxes," from the Spring 2003 *Canadian Literature* special issue on Carson, Ian Rae picks apart Solway's critique and finds in it two particularly distasteful elements: projection, and professional jealousy. Rae details Solway's own history of literary fraud. Just years prior to the publication of "The Trouble With Annie," Solway had invented a Greek poet named Andreas Karavis. Solway claimed to have discovered and translated Karavis; the hoax began with an essay by Solway on Karavis in *Books in Canada,* and included

two collections "translated" by Solway. In a 2000 *Gazette* article, critic Joel Yanofsky noted, "The irony is that Karavis is now being lionized, while Solway has been mainly ignored"[4] (Yanofsky). Whatever Solway might have been trying to expose or critique via his deception, the project failed. This failure, Rae posits, is part of what drives Solway's attack on Carson. Rae writes, "As an intellectual, a grecophile, and a lyric poet from the Montreal area, Solway is vying with Carson for roughly the same readership and hoping to win the judgment of history" (Rae 61).

Indeed, Solway's essay on Carson achieves little in terms of putting a dent in Carson's reputation; if anything, it has likely damaged Solway more than it has anyone else. My interest is not in what Solway thinks of Carson, but in *how* he characterizes her, and specifically in his deployment of the diagnostic criteria of autism in this characterization. Consider again Solway's comment on the excerpt from Carson's poem "That Strength," which Solway identifies as making unearned use of Paul Celan's fragmentary style. Solway asks:

> What is the clear sense of the piece, if indeed there is one? Is there a single line qua line we might single out as striking or memorable? Does it radiate an impression of lexical authority? Does anything hide beneath the broken glitter of its verbal surface? Where is the gravitas appropriate to the theme (what with all the "weeping, sweeping / groaning," etc.)? (Solway)

Here, again, Solway's critique of Carson is formulated using the same criteria we find when clinicians go about diagnosing a patient with autism. Carson's fragmentary language is all flash,

[4] As of 2023, *Saracen Island: The Poems of Andreas Karavis,* and *An Andreas Karavis Companion,* both dating 1998 and both "edited" by David Solway, are available for purchase on the Véhicule Press website. The latter volume is classified as fiction.

but devoid of meaning, just like the utterances of Kanner's child subjects. In questioning the poem's "lexical authority," Solway is asking whether Carson has real command of the words she uses. By searching for "gravitas *appropriate* to the theme" (emphasis mine), Solway is parroting the judgments of two generations of autism researchers unnerved by the apparent lack of emotion in autistic people's affect. He is identifying what M. Remi Yergeau has referred to as "a certain awkwardness that inheres in rhetorical situations touched by the autistic" (Yergeau 36). Whether or not he means to, Solway is aligning himself with the status quo, with the "conventional audience" we met in chapter two, to those who ignore the strange and unusual.

Carson as epidemic

I do not wish to suggest that Solway actually believes Carson to be autistic; if he did, I don't think he would be as comfortable as he is using "autistic" as an insult. I believe that, for Solway, autism serves as a metaphor for all that he finds undesirable in Carson's poetry, in her manner, her technique, her persona, and in her popularity. The implications are significant: for Solway, Carson is not merely autistic, but she is *the autism epidemic itself.* That is, not only is Carson devoid of volitional, rhetorical, artistic communication, she is capable of infecting others with her non-rhetoricity. Solway argues not just that Carson is a fool, but that *she renders others foolish.* He claims that Carson's reputation has been:

> mainly spread and consolidated by editors, critics and reviewers whose literary expertise—regardless of whatever previous accomplishments they may licitly boast—can be described in far too many instances as a kind of higher *Sesame Street* word-and-number recognition facility. They tend to sound like sciolistic Counts and half-educated

> Big Birds reacting with manic delight to the lexical fragments and allusions that Carson-type poetry provides for their enlightenment.

That is, Carson turns otherwise intelligent and competent adults into children. His choice of "sciolistic" is telling: in Solway's estimation, the critics who applaud Carson are capable only of shallow, surface-level interpretation; that is, they lack the very critical capacity that is meant to define them. Solway's description of Carson's uncomprehending readers "reacting with manic delight to … lexical fragments and allusions" invokes the image of the idiot, the half-wit … the autist.

If I have spent more time arguing with Solway than I should, it is because of how infuriatingly reminiscent his logic is of the logic used to strip autistic people of their—our—autonomy. Solway accuses Carson of mimicking other poets; Solway himself mimics the language of the biomedical and psychiatric industries, of eugenicist scientists and moral-panic organizations, of Harold Monro's startlingly similar assessment of Emily Dickinson as "intellectually blind, partially deaf, and mostly dumb to the art of poetry … [h]er tiny lyrics appear to be no more than the jottings of a half—idiotic school-girl instead of the grave musings of a full grown, educated woman" (Howe vii). Solway creates a Carson who is not merely autistically arhetorical, but a Carson who causes others around her to become arhetorical. Carson's autism is, in Solway's view, contagious. One of the many frustrations of studying the history of autism diagnosis, as an autistic person, is that so often the clinical observations presented are essentially correct, while the clinical conclusions seem completely nonsensical. Leo Kanner has all the evidence in front of him that his child subjects have a profound and meaningful relationship with language, that their language is indeed communicative, yet he still characterizes their words as empty babble.

Indeed, Solway's approach to Carson shares a troubling affinity with the writings of another of the "fathers" of autism diagnosis: Bruno Bettelheim. I have avoided discussing Bettelheim in these chapters because his theories about autistic children and their parents have long since fallen into disfavour (and rightly so), and because of the many legitimate claims that Bettelheim was physically and psychologically abusive towards the patients in his care at the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School in Chicago from the late 1940s until the 1970s (Levitt). Bettelheim was an Austrian-born Holocaust survivor; his experiences in the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald were foundational in the development of his perspective on human behaviour. Despite having no formal training as a psychoanalyst, Bettelheim was deeply committed to Freudian thought (Kidd 84). It was Bettelheim who developed the once-popular "refrigerator mother" theory of autism, claiming that autism in children was the result of "a lack of mutuality between mother and child" (86). To Bettelheim, the behaviour of autistic children resembled that of prisoners he had encountered in the German camps; in the introduction to his 1959 book *The Empty Fortress,* Bettelheim writes,

> Some victims of the concentration camps had lost their humanity in response to extreme situations. Autistic children withdraw from the world before their humanity ever really develops. Could there be any connection, I wondered, between the impact of these two kinds of inhumanity I had known—one inflicted for political reasons on victims of a social system, the other perhaps a self-chosen state of dehumanization (if one may speak of choice in an infant's responses)? (7)

For Bettelheim, autism is the result of a "catastrophic threat" (43): the inept, anxious, or inexperienced mother who wishes her child had never been born. In Bettelheim's estimation, these mothers are to autistic children as Nazi prison guards are to Holocaust survivors; they are

tyrannical, cold, and inhumane, and the resultant behaviour from their charges is "withdrawal, hopelessness, daydreaming, gaze-avoidance, and an obsession with sameness" (Kidd 87).

Bettelheim's theories, absurd though they are in today's understanding of autism, were highly influential in their time; *The Empty Fortress* was a mass-market publication, not an obscure scholarly volume. As such, his notions made their way into the popular consciousness, and it is entirely possible that they inform Solway's adverse reaction to what he sees in Carson's writing and the popular response to it. Bettelheim observed certain behaviours in his patients, related those behaviours to ones he had observed in his own life, and concluded that similar circumstances must have been responsible in both cases. For Bettelheim, the behaviours associated with autism are similar enough to those exhibited in the concentration camps to warrant drawing an instrumental connection between them; if the effect is similar, then so too must be the cause. For Solway, the similarity he sees in Carson's and Celan's poems signals a misalignment, because Carson hasn't shared the experience that Solway sees as foundational to Celan's mode of expression. Bettelheim's position is *inclusive:* anyone displaying the traits he came to know during the Holocaust must have some sort of comparable trauma. Solway's is *exclusive:* anyone displaying traits he associates with Holocaust survival had darn well better be a bona fide Holocaust survivor.

Solway is not incorrect in his observation that Carson's work is fragmentary and pieced together from different and seemingly incongruent influences, or that her affect is flat, or that her reactions seem perhaps "inappropriate" by most standards. Carson would likely be the first to accept these allegations. In his screed, however, Solway takes the position that if he doesn't see the value in Carson's writing, then there must not be any. This, of course, is nonsense.

Carson as autistic avatar

I've stated before that it's not my business to determine whether or not Anne Carson is autistic; she has referred to herself (perhaps jokingly) as being so, David Solway has accused her of being so, and other poets have pondered the question in their own verse. Poet Roxanna Bennett begins her poem "The Lost Dodo" with the lines, "Is Anne Carson autistic or am I / projecting understanding & if you / find that offensive—why?" (Bennett). Australian writer Francesca Rendle-Short invokes Carson in "*Towards* poetic address: Anne Carson slag," a poem about Rendle-Short's father, the Evangelical Christian physician who contributed to distinguishing autism from the earlier diagnosis of "childhood schizophrenia." Rendle-Short opens her poem, "I can't get to sleep. Anne Carson is in my head. I think I'm talking to her in understandable sentences. One at a time. But I know it's all gibberish." And goes on to ask, "His take on autism, [for instance]. Give a mother love and she will love back / love forwards. //… does he say something else here along these lines?" (Rendle-Short). Carson's 1998 verse novel *Autobiography of Red* has been cited by autistic writer Dani Ryskamp as embracing "the experience of neuroatypicality" placing "the reader directly in the head of its 'monstrous' protagonist, encouraging not only empathy but identification" with Geryon, the book's protagonist, and with "the poetic language that comprises his experience" (Ryskamp 31). Geryon, who is also the subject of Carson's 2016 verse novel *Red Doc>,* is considered by many readers to be an autistic character (@nicohhhlette).

Classicist and autism theorist Kristina Chew analyses a poem from *Short Talks* called "Short Talk on Autism," and her analysis will be my entry point into my discussion of *Short Talks* as a collection. While Chew interprets—and rightly—"Short Talk on Autism" as a text *about* autism, I contend that *Short Talks* as a collection warrants consideration as a fundamentally

autistic text. The fact that only "Short Talk on Autism" has been read through an autism theory lens while the collection as a whole has been neglected by critical autism studies theorists seems emblematic, to me, of a larger cultural refusal to name autism even when it's standing in front of us wearing a name tag. In the teaching guide produced by *Short Talks* publisher Brick Books, presumably for the benefit of high school teachers (the guide includes a glossary of poetry terms and a crossword puzzle), the entry on "Short Talk on Autism" reads:

> Short Talk on Autism (page 39)
>
> - Describe the setting in this prose poem.
> - Do a bit of research on Autism Spectrum Disorder. In what ways does this piece reflect the mind of someone on the autism spectrum?
> - What are the properties of the graphite in a pencil? How does this information make the sentence "what does it eat, light?" make sense?
>
> (Lucas 13)

Given the state of autism research, suggesting that high school students embark on such a journey without the guidance of an autistic elder demonstrates a glaring lack of understanding of autism and its place in the culture; proposing that "a bit of research" (presumably online) might elucidate "the mind of someone on the autism spectrum" is ignorant at best, and potentially dangerous at worst. The writer of the teacher's guide presumes that "research"—that is, reading biomedical and psychiatric sources—would render a young reader more knowledgeable about autism than would simply reading the poem. The irony, of course, is that Carson's *Short Talks* as a whole represents some elements of autism far more accurately that would many of the hits a student is

likely to receive from typing "Autism Spectrum Disorder" into their search engine. Indeed, I liken the experience of reading *Short Talks* to a sort of autism immersion program.

Autism from the outside: "Short Talk on Autism"

Kristina Chew uses Carson's "Short Talk on Autism" as an example of poetic language that evokes autistic communication styles. Chew identifies the prose poem as "the ideal form for the metonymic language of autism . . . [t]he sudden disruptions of topic and meaning in prose poetry are similar to an autistic person's abrupt introduction of unrelated concepts and associations of entities and ideas not based on logical connections" ("Fractioned" 136). "Short Talk on Autism," Chew explains, presents a scenario in which a female subject is spoken to by a doctor, but "does not hear the content of the doctor's language," experiencing only the phonetic elements of language and not the semantic ones. The subject of the poem seems to fall "into a reverie" of b-words: "its language is boomings beckonings boulders boasts boomerangs boulder hats. Brother?" (*Short Talks* 39). Chew likens the repeated fragments of the question "*what does it eat, light?"* to autistic verbal stimming, repeated until "their meaning is lost and they are repeated like a choral refrain" ("Fractioned" 136). Chew also identifies an ambiguity as to whether the "she" in the poem and the "doctor-interlocutor" communicate effectively at all; we don't know whether the "she" understands what the doctor is trying to tell or ask her, and we don't know whether the text of the poem—the descriptive text or the italicized *what does it eat* refrain—is uttered aloud to the doctor or held inside as an inner monologue while a more quotidian exchange is happening in the room.

Carson does little to tell us what role autism plays in "Short Talk on Autism." The simplest reading is that the "she" character is meant to be understood as autistic; she is in the presence of a doctor of some kind, presumably in an office or clinic, and the language that surrounds her—for "she" is not the speaker of the poem, but the subject of it—is fragmented, repetitive, apparently meaningless and yet, to Carson, worth capturing in a poem. But what if the autism in the poem isn't associated with "she," but with the brother about whom the doctor (perhaps?) asks? *Short Talks* was published in 1992, at a time when autism was seldom associated with girls and women. Is "she" the guardian of an autistic brother, or someone who has lost an autistic brother? Then again, maybe "she" *is* meant to suggest a first-person "I," after all. A common trait in autistic language use is a refusal to adhere to rules around pronoun attribution: autistic children often speak in the third person (using "he wants to go upstairs" rather than "I want to go upstairs,"), tend to use gendered pronouns interchangeably, and often use "its" in the place of other pronouns; these observations were made by Kanner in his 1943 paper, and remain part of the ASD screening process today (Naigles et al. 11). Carson's "she" rejects personal pronouns when referring to the doctor; the subject "cannot quite hear what the doctor is saying it is a large grey cheerful woman its language is boomings."

In "Short Talk on Autism," not only do pronouns fail to correspond with their subjects, but standard English parts of speech are thoroughly jumbled. From the fifth line on, as though in response to the question "Brother? Tell me about your brother?" the poem disintegrates into one long run-on question with no clear syntactic structure:

From the tip

of its pencil *what does it eat, light?* shriller

than a rat's scream slices her backwall into

what does it jump blue and grabs at them

cuts herself off at the root now adrift on that

wayland membrane where *what does* wan-

der yondering all those blades of asunder her

what flying off in conversation all her

life and *eat* kept *eat* going let's say they're at

large somewhere say Central Park doing *eat*

eat eat who knows what damage *eat light?* (*Short Talks* 39)

Chew observes in "Short Talk on Autism" the kind of fragmented, metonymic language use she associates with her minimally speaking son Charlie;[5] indeed, in another of her essays on decoding Charlie's speech, Chew details how her training as a classicist allows her to approach Charlie's utterances with the same patient and inquisitive nature that she and Carson both apply to ancient writings ("Autism" 309). To the non-autistic mother of the autistic son, "Short Talk on Autism" resembles the language of autism as it is heard from outside.

Playful language hacking

As an autistic reader and a parent of autistic children, I understand Chew's perspective on this one poem, and I insert my own perspective here: "Short Talk on Autism" might be an accurate representation of what autism sounds like from the outside, but *Short Talks* as a collection represents just as accurately how autism feels from the inside. In fact, I read "Short Talk on Autism" as perhaps the least autistic of the collection's poems, precisely because it captures

[5] Carson's language is also, here, reminiscent of Werth et al.'s collection of research subject Grace's language inventions; "wan-/der yondering" shares a resonance with "going underground, going thunderground."

autistic utterance the way non-autistic people perceive it; it is self-consciously autistic, and that self-consciousness renders it compliant and, by extension, non-autistic. Stepping aside from what autism looks and sounds like from the outside, and referring back to Rodas's categories of autistic language use, I see in *Short Talks* the full suite Rodas identifies: *ricochet* (verbal repetition, echolalia: each poem's title begins with the same three words, "Short Talk on"), *apostrophe* (the collection is imagined as a series of lectures, but the audience for these lectures could be anyone or no one), *ejaculation* (the subjects of the "short talks" are only nominally linked one to the other, and the link between the titles and the poems themselves is not always obvious; *Short Talks* is a collection of non-sequiturs), *discretion* (the collection is exactly that: a *collection* of ideas, arranged one to a page, with identical formatting), and *invention* (Carson's poems are startlingly evocative in their figurative language, and the degree of figurative language is entirely incongruous with what a reader typically expects from something prosaically labelled "Short Talk on ____").

There are forty-five individual poems in the 1992 collection, plus a prefacing piece called, simply, "Introduction." Thirty-two of the poems were re-printed, with only minor revisions, in Carson's 1995 collection *Plainwater;*[6] however, the poems in *Plainwater* are arranged as a single sequence titled "Short Talks" rather than as forty-five discrete poems. While each poem in *Short Talks* is given its own page and a full title, the segments reproduced in *Plainwater* are arranged in multiples on the page, with each extract labelled "On ____" rather than "Short Talk on ____." The repetition of "On" does serve as a sort of incantatory anaphora, but it lacks the insistent authority of the full, repeated formulation. The "Short Talks" sequence in *Plainwater* imports the first half of "Introduction" from *Short Talks,* ending on the line "You can never know enough,

[6] I feel it bears mentioning that "Short Talk on Autism" is one of the seventeen poems from *Short Talks* that is excluded from the "Short Talks" sequence in *Plainwater*.

never work enough, never use enough infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough." The original version of "Introduction" carries on with a narrative: the speaker "copied out everything that was said, things vast distances apart" in "fifty-three fascicles"[7] (23) that were ultimately taken up by "men" who locked up all but three of the fascicles and instructed the speaker "to imitate a mirror like that of water (but water is not a mirror and it is dangerous to think so)" (24). It is an odd bit of writing, but it makes sense in the context of *Short Talks;* as I have already observed, it cheekily provides a narrative, just after the speaker has told us, in the first half of "Introduction," that the "everything that was said," which she has written down, constructs "an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime" (23).

The titles of the rest of the poems in *Short Talks* range from the conceptual ("Short Talk on Major and Minor," "Short Talk on Rectification," "Short Talk on the Truth to be Had in Dreams") to the concrete ("Short Talk on Trout," "Short Talk on Vicuñas," "Short Talk on *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deyman*"). The relationship between the title and the poem itself is sometimes quite clear, other times fanciful. Although each poem appears on the page as a block of fully justified text, the poems vary stylistically: some relay anecdotes (real or imagined, historical or contemporary), some are descriptive, some are philosophical. Some read like translated fragments: "Short Talk on le Bonheur d'Être Bien Aimée" comprises just two syntactical units:

Day after day I think of you as soon as I wake

[7] Recall that Emily Dickinson, too, used the word "fascicles" for her hand-bound collections; the word is so strongly connected to Dickinson that it seems unlikely that Carson would choose the word for any other reason than to refer to Dickinson's self-publishing habits.

up. Someone has put cries of birds on the

air like jewels. (44)

The longest of the short talks, "Short Talk on Housing," takes the form of an incomprehensible instruction that involves wearing "several hats" and engaging in rituals that "function chiefly to differentiate horizontal from vertical" if one should find oneself having "no house" (33). The advice offered is gnomic and surreal; the poem begins with the direction to wear multiple hats, removing the outer ones as they become sodden with rain and snow. After veering into other subjects, the poem returns at the end to the hats, concluding with "Hats do not need to be so decorated for they will 'pile up' on your head, in and of themselves, *qua* hats, if you have understood my original instruction" (33). Of course, nobody can have understood the original instruction.

Short Talks is considered influential enough a work to have been reissued in 1995 as the inaugural volume in Brick Books' *Brick Books Classics* series. Despite this, relatively little critical work has focused on the collection. This seems odd, especially given that the phrase "Short Talk on ____" has become synonymous with Carson, even in texts where *Short Talks* itself is absent. *Canadian Literature* editor Kevin McNeilly titles his introductory note to the journal's special issue on Carson "Five Fairly Short Talks on Anne Carson," but *Short Talks* is given only a smattering of tangential references in the issue (McNeilly). The 2007 issue of the journal *English Studies in Canada* features an essay by Emily Carr titled "Six Short Talks: reading in, around, & on (& on) Anne Carson's 'Possessive Used As Drink (Me): a lecture in the form of fifteen minutes.'" The title invokes *Short Talks* to discuss a collaborative work to which Carson contributed a sonnet sequence. In neither piece does the author replicate the style, or even the format of Carson's *Short Talks.* Where Carson uses "Short Talk on ____" to name her poems, McNeilly and Carr use the formulation merely to create section headings; the content below the

headings doesn't make much of an effort to mirror the style of the poems. "Short Talk On ____" has become shorthand for "I am familiar with Carson's back-catalogue."

What is it about *Short Talks* that has made it at once a formal phenomenon and an understudied text? It's surely not the weirdest of Carson's collections. It is, however, weirder than it looks. Let's start with the title: *Short Talks.* I've mentioned above that the title is perfectly descriptive, and yet, is it? The poems are all *called* "Short Talk on ____" but is that what they are? To announce that one is presenting a series of short talks on something—on anything—is to assert one's authority; typically, to "give a talk" on something means to share one's expertise publicly. As a respected classics scholar, Carson, no doubt, has long been considered an expert in her field. But that field is ancient Greek translation, not "Rain" or "Brigitte Bardot" or "Penal Servitude." What gives a classics professor the confidence to declare themselves an authority on such subjects? Does one become an authority simply by claiming that status? If one repeats it enough times, does it become true? Opening *Short Talks* to the contents page, the reader comes face to face with a litany of authoritative declarations; indeed, the table of contents itself reads almost like a poem, the anaphora of "Short Talk on" ringing over and over, starting with "Short Talk on *Homo Sapiens"* and finally closing by return with "Short Talk on Who You Are" (presumably, if you have the capacity to read the collection, "who you are" is *Homo Sapiens*).

As an autistic reader, I can't help but notice an interesting irony: while the word "short" is a near-synonym of the word "small," a "short talk" is the opposite of "small talk." The former suggests the nerdish info-dumping autistics love, which is so often mischaracterized (and pathologized) as pedantry by non-autistic witnesses; the latter is the sort of scripted but ultimately meaningless social dialogue with which autistic people struggle. Carson's "Short Talks" skip past the pleasantries associated with small talk; "Introduction" begins as a folktale or ballad might, with the words "Early one morning" (23). "Early one morning" is a stock phrase, but Carson

immediately subverts it: “Early one morning words were missing.” The text begins by pointing out that, once, there was no text. “Before that,” the poem goes on, “words were not. Facts were, faces were.” There’s an ambiguity in the line, “Before that, words were not.” Does Carson mean to suggest that, prior to the morning when words were missing, words had not been missing? Or is she suggesting that words had not *been* at all, and that there had been, at that point, only facts and faces? The poem doesn’t attempt to clarify; Carson writes that “One day someone noticed there were stars but no words, why?” Does Carson mean that the “someone” wondered why stars were there but no words, or is Carson asking, “why did this person suddenly notice that there were stars but no words?” And did the someone recall that there *had been* words, or had there never been words at all until this someone noticed?

The speaker of “Introduction” uses familiar words, but nearly every line can be read to mean more than one thing. Whether Carson means to or not, she captures here an essential facet of autistic experience: finding ambiguity in language that other people perceive as being clear. Whatever Carson means to point to in opening her collection with a fable about words being missing (or not having been at all), the scenario she describes suggests the autistic phenomenon of *situational mutism* (Steffenburg et al. 1163), of not being able to speak and not entirely understanding why. I’ve referred to Julia Miele Rodas’s five categories of autistic language usage, but recall that in *Autistic Disturbances* Rodas actually identifies six categories: before she goes into detail about ricochet, apostrophe, ejaculation, discretion, and invention, Rodas posits that *silence* is a fundamentally autistic communication strategy. Carson begins “Introduction,” and *Short Talks* itself, with a fable about mutism. Throughout the collection, she refers to the incapacity of language to capture whatever it is her speaker means to say; in “Short Talk on Autism,” language swirls and hiccups, but it does not transmit meaning. In “Short Talk on Housing” we are given instructions that can’t possibly be followed. The speaker of “Short Talk

on Why Some People Find Trains Exciting" doesn't explain *why* some people find trains exciting, but instead lists things people might find exciting about trains—"It is the names Northland Santa Fe Nickle Plate Line Delta Jump Dayliner Heartland Favourite Taj Express it is the long lit windows the plush seats the smokers the sleeping cars…" (36)—ultimately ending with a turn to untranslated French: "… the reading glasses make her look like Racine or Baudelaire *je ne sais plus lequel* stuffing their shadows into her mouth *qui sait même qui sait"* (36). The title suggests expertise and explanation, but the poem ends with a declaration of not knowing (and itself an ambiguous one: spoken aloud, *"qui sait même qui sait"* or "who even knows who knows" can be heard equally as *"qui sait même qui c'est,"* or "who even knows who it is?"). The poem itself is as autistic in its style as any I've seen; the choice of trains (an almost cliché autistic special interest) as the poem's subject, the cataloguing of "it is" items, the syntactic muddling ("the curious rumpled ankle socks speeding up to 130 kilometers per hour black trees crowding by bridges racketing past the reading glasses make her look like Racine …") make for a poem which seems almost to be a companion piece to "Short Talk on Autism," but without the latter's self-consciousness.

On presence and absence

What are we then to make of *Short Talks?* And what are we to make of its near-total absence from criticism on Carson? I have mentioned before that *Short Talks* was Carson's first full-length collection, published in Canada by a small press; prior to that point, Canadian literary journals hadn't shown much interest in Carson's work, but Americans appreciated her. *Plainwater* was published by American publisher Alfred A. Knopf; it's easy to imagine that a small-press publication in Canada could vanish under the shadow of a well-known American literary

publisher. Debut collections disappear all the time. And yet, Carson keeps reminding us that *Short Talks* exists; when she won the Griffin Poetry Prize (her second) in 2014 for *Red Doc>*, she flouted convention at the awards gala by reading not from her winning collection but from *Short Talks* (Carson, "Poet Anne"). In 2018, she began an invited lecture at the City University of New York with an interactive reading of "Short Talk on the Sensation of Airplane Takeoff" (Carson, "A Lecture"). She read the same interactive piece in Iceland in 2021 (Carson, "Upplestur"), along with "Short Talk on Walking Backwards" and "Short Talk on Major and Minor," which both appear in *Short Talks,* and "Short Talk on Pink," and "Short Talk on Hegel," which do not.[8] Perhaps Carson continues to read these short talks because audiences enjoy them; perhaps she has an animistic relationship with them, and wants to bring them with her wherever she goes; perhaps she enjoys the sameness of structure matched with the variation in subject and style from piece to piece. Perhaps she stubbornly refuses to let them go unnoticed. Whatever the case may be, we can't write *Short Talks* off as mere gimmick, and we can't write Carson off as mere parrot, repeating without volition lines and phrases and bits of language she picked up somewhere else.

[8] "Short Talk on Pink" appears in the January 6, 2022, edition of the *London Review of Books;* I have not been able to find any publication information for "Short Talk on Hegel."

Conclusion

Now, where could I learn any comical turn
That was not in a book on the shelf?
No teacher to take me and mold me and make me
A merryman, fool, or an elf?
But I'm proud to recall that in no time at all,
With no other recourses but my own resources,
With firm application and determination
I made a fool of myself!

—Sylvia Fine, "The Maladjusted Jester"

This thesis began at, of all places, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Awards. Weirdly enough, it ends there too. These days, the Arts and Letters ceremony and reception are held at The Rooms, a large, angular glass building perched on a hill above downtown St. John's. The Rooms opened in 2005, gathering under one roof the province's art gallery, museum, and archives; there's also a small theatre space, interactive exhibits, a gift shop, and a pretty nice little restaurant that overlooks the harbour and the Southside Hills. Among the many attractions is a preserved giant squid in a long glass tank, and a seabird diorama with a touchscreen that allows you to hear recordings of the birds' sounds.

The 2023 ceremony is the first I've attended in about fifteen years. The organizers have only set up enough seats for about half the bodies that have crammed into the space; some folks

are watching from the stairs that run alongside the windowed area where a low temporary stage has been set up, and still more have wandered to the gallery where the winning entries are on display. I've come alone, leaving my husband and kids home to play video games while I try my hand at "people-ing" for the first time in a long while. Since my diagnosis, I've avoided big public events. For a while, I was able to use COVID-19 precautions as a cover, but now that we're supposed to be "back to normal," I've realized that my anxiety is more about human interaction qua human interaction than it is about viral transfer (although, don't get me wrong: I'm scared of that, too). I've managed to propel myself out of the house by telling myself that it would be bad form not to attend the ceremony, although this isn't at all true; in these purportedly post-COVID times, prize winners are no longer called to the stage to be handed cheques and certificates. There is no handshaking at all; prize money is sent by e-transfer, and winners collect their certificates (and lanyards marked "WINNER") from a table at the front entrance. Nobody would have noticed if I hadn't made an appearance. I stand by myself through the ceremony and announcements, one of only a dozen or so people wearing a precautionary face mask. As soon as the ceremony ends, I collect my coat and walk home, skipping out on the wine and cheese, ghosting the dozen or so people I passed on my way in who had remarked how long it's been since they'd last seen me in person.

My winning entry this year isn't a poem; it's an essay about teaching poetry, and about how being autistic makes it easy for me to do some things (like recognize metrical patterns and word families) and hard for me to do others (like explain how meter and syntax are supposed to work; as Simon Baron-Cohen's Empathy Quotient questionnaire says, "I find it difficult to explain to others things that I understand easily, when they don't understand it the first time") (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 172). In the essay, I ask myself awful questions like: are the

skills for which I'm known as a writer actually skills, or are they merely *symptoms?* If they're *symptoms,* do my accomplishments still count? These are questions that I, standing on the shoulders of M. Remi Yergeau, would call out as ableist if someone else asked them of me.

In this dissertation, I have offered my particular and peculiar readings of work by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Les Murray, and Anne Carson. As I explained early on, my selection criteria in choosing which poets to include in my study had to do with a certain joy and exuberance I identified in the writing of each, and with a certain joy and exuberance their poetry elicited in me as a reader. In the first months of my research, this was as much of a common thread as I could find between all four: they wrote weird poetry, and I liked it. It was only as I began to engage more deeply with critical writing on each of the four poets that another shared trait emerged: at one point or another each poet had been dismissed, either explicitly or tacitly, as mentally deficient. The language used by vitriolic critics—and even by some laudatory ones, as we saw in my chapters on Murray and Carson—is consistent with language that has been used in autism diagnosis for the past eighty years, and in diagnosis of mental "retardation" before that.

When I first proposed that my research would be conducted using a critical autism studies framework, the crux of what I meant was that I, an autistic poet and scholar, would be studying the material critically and autistically. The framework informed and was informed by the methods; the common denominator was me, the autistic reader. What I found was that in the case of each poet, autism (or something similar) had already been deployed as a way of questioning or undermining that poet's rhetorical capacity. The poets were already being viewed through an "autism lens," but not a critical one, and not one informed by anything more than a superficial understanding of autism, nor by any real grasp of the complexities of human intelligence. My work became less about introducing autism into the conversation around my chosen poets, and

more about correcting and recontextualizing the way autism had already been—intentionally or otherwise—tethered to them. In doing so, I skirted the contested territory of diagnosis, taking a neuroqueering approach to each of the poets. For theorist Nick Walker, neuroqueering "is first and foremost a verb […] an emergent array of subversive and transformative practices" through which people may cultivate "human potentials for creativity, well-being, and beautiful weirdness" (176). For me, this has meant that rather than dismissing critical assessments that view the poets in question as deficient, defective, and non-rhetorical, I have tried to reframe the criticism by asking, "ok, but so what?" In doing so, I have taken the view that autism (in today's terminology) or "idiocy" (in the language of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) is a value-neutral phenomenon. The critics who engaged the language of pathology to insult Hopkins, Dickinson, Murray, and Carson could have attacked from any angle; why did they choose to question their targets' mental and neurological capacities? Why is "idiot" the go-to? Why do the poems elicit that particular response?

Having written these chapters, I am now asking myself another question: why has seeing these four poets repudiated by their critics elicited such a strong response in me? It's not as though Emily Dickinson's reputation has been tainted by the mostly forgotten Harold Monro having called her poems the "jottings of a half-idiotic school-girl" (Howe vii). David Solway's attack on Anne Carson doesn't seem to have done any damage to Carson's career, nor to her popularity. Gerard Manley Hopkins has been part of the English-language canon for nearly a hundred years, and has an international society devoted to the analysis of his work. Les Murray, too, is part of the canon, and remains enormously influential even after his death. So, why am I so bothered? I have dedicated nearly as much space in this thesis to autistic close readings of cruel reviews as I have to the poets and poems themselves. Part of me—the part with the inappropriate

sense of humour—wants to attribute my reaction to autism itself; after all, clinical research suggests that "[a] large percentage of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibit the symptoms of *DSM-IV*-defined Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), which is characterized by a pattern of hostile and defiant behavior directed toward adults" (Gadow et al. 1302). As a child, I was conscientious and compliant to a fault; perhaps, on some level, I feel that this thesis is my opportunity to allow my inner child-self to let her "hostile and defiant" side emerge, and to defend her fellow weird kids against the slings of adult bullies.

Or, perhaps, to return to my prizewinning essay, I hear embedded in these critiques echoes of my own self-evaluation. Are my own poetic utterances, with their obsessive rhythmic patterns and phonetic pile-ups "speech without sense and prolonged merely by echoes" (Clutten-Brock, qtd. in Tackett 147), as was suggested of Hopkins's work? Do I, as was said of Murray, "indiscriminately absorb" data, only to "regurgitate it in a novel manner" and call it poetry (Ratcliffe)? In defending poets with whom I feel I share a certain sensibility, perhaps I am attempting to defend myself against my own inner judgment—and against my own internalized ableism. To do this, I have had to shift from an instinctual reaction of "What are you talking about? I'm/they're not like that at all!" to "Maybe I am/they are like that, and that's valuable too."

As a humanities scholar, it's my job to examine the things we've all agreed make us human. I don't think I can overstate just how surreal it is to learn, well into adulthood, that the entirety of who you are as a person fits very neatly into the official list of diagnostic criteria for autism. Autism is a pervasive condition that effectively mediates every aspect of an individual's interaction, interpretation, perception, cognition, communication, relationships… the things that make humans *human.* Autism signifies non-rhetoricity, as we see in Yergeau; asynchronicity, as is

captured beautifully by the te reo Māori word for autism, *takiwātanga,* which translates to "my/their own time and space" (Tupou et al. 9); and non-normativity, which is at essence a bit of a word-swap for what we once called "abnormality." Autism forces us to re-examine what constitutes *humanity, humanness, the human.* Every measure associated with autism (at the clinical level, at least) has to do with failure to do the things humans are supposed to do easily and naturally: failure to pick up subtext or nuance (as in the case of literality), failure to play appropriately, failure to derive pleasure from the "right" things, failure to match the "right" emotional state with the "right" facial expression, even failure to laugh at the "right" jokes.

And so this research has been, in many ways, an exploration of the notion of failure: of my own failure as an autistic person to interpret things the way they are "supposed" to be interpreted, and also an examination of the critical failures that can happen when we approach our research with unexamined assumptions. This is what we've seen in a lot of analysis of autism by non-autistic researchers. In my reading, I have had to surrender my time and energy to psychiatric articles detailing, in sometimes very distressing ways, the behaviours and habits of autistic clinical subjects. The process has made me quite emotional, not because the clinicians' and diagnosticians' observations were false or incorrect (although sometimes they are), but because even when the observations are astute, the conclusions are way off. The "experts" designing, conducting, and interpreting these experiments are limited by their neuro-normativity. Just as my autism *can't not* influence my engagement with the world, their non-autism *can't not* result in a skewed interpretation of the behaviour and communication of the autists they observe. The fantasy (or fallacy) of clinical objectivity directly contravenes the higher law of "it takes one to know one." In reading these articles, I've found myself commenting either "no, no, you don't get it at all," or "yes, but I can explain!" I've been reminded of Chimamanda Adichie's talk "The

Danger of a Single Story," where Adichie says, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (Adichie). Hopkins's critics, for example, examined his poems looking for evidence of his anxiety, misery, and despair, and they found it; clinicians examine their autistic subjects for evidence of lack, deficit, and failure, and sure enough, they find it, too.

But: what do these findings overlook in the process? This was what I really wanted to play with in my study, and this is why I wanted to link my reading style to the "low theory" Jack Halberstam discusses in *The Queer Art of Failure*. As I have explained in this thesis, one of my "communication deficits" as an autistic person is in the way I negotiate the literal and the figurative. To take things literally is to fail at interpretation, to be a naïve, unsophisticated reader. What we see, though, is the ways in which failure can be generative: my "failed" readings offer alternative interpretations—and, I think, valid ones—of some rather complex writing.

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The epigraph of this concluding chapter comes from the 1955 comic film *The Court Jester.* In the film, actor Danny Kaye (a human embodiment of exuberance if ever there were one) plays Hawkins, a circus performer who has joined a band of rebels determined to overthrow the tyrannical King Roderick (Cecil Parker) and return the English throne to its rightful heir. Having assumed the identity of traveling entertainer Giacomo the Incomparable in order to gain entry to the castle, Hawkins falls under a spell cast by the witch Griselda (Mildred Natwick). At the snap of a finger, the earnest and bumbling Hawkins becomes Errol Flynn-like in his suaveness: the perfect chivalrous lover for Roderick's daughter, Princess Gwendolyn (Angela Lansbury). With another snap, the spell is broken, and he is Hawkins again. And back, and forth. In the film's climactic sword fighting scene (because *of course* there is a climactic sword fighting scene),

Hawkins/Giacomo has been entranced by Griselda to believe that he is a great swordsman. He fights the scheming Sir Ravenhurst (played by Basil Rathbone, legendary actor of the swashbuckling genre) with the nonchalance befitting a fairy tale hero; that is, until he snaps his fingers at Ravenhurst, inadvertently breaking the spell. As the terrified jester, Hawkins swings his sword wildly and shouts incoherently at his assailant; he crawls under tables and hides behind bedcurtains; he kicks and bites. Another finger-snap, and his bravado is restored. One more snap, and Hawkins is rendered a fool again. Or, more accurately, Hawkins is revealed as the fool he is.

For Hawkins, the finger snap is a trigger; he can sustain the illusion of sophistication and elegance until he is "snapped" out of it. Over the course of writing this thesis, I have often felt like Hawkins; one minute I am crafting graceful prose and drawing insightful connections, and then a finger snaps and the spell is broken. Only, the finger snap is not a finger snap, but a line of ableist vitriol, or a skewed interpretation of clinical observations, or an outdated assumption about autistic people—about *me,* and about my children, and about so many I people I care about—that should have been discarded years ago but which is still taken as gospel within its field. Then, like Hawkins as Hawkins, I swing wildly at the aggressor, making animal noises and backing myself clumsily under my desk.[1] Determining whether the trigger *renders me foolish* or *reveals my inherent foolishness* is beyond the scope and scale of the current project; for the purpose of this conclusion, I wish merely to register that this research has been hard. It has been personal, and I have taken it personally—perhaps more than I should have, and almost certainly more than is wise.

In her memoir *Ten Steps to Nanette,* Tasmanian comic Hannah Gadsby details the process of writing *Nanette,* her award-winning stage show. The show, for anyone who hasn't seen it, is

[1] Figuratively, for the most part.

about identity and trauma. It is not about Gadsby's autism, but it is deeply informed by it. Gadsby writes that when she first tested the material that would become *Nanette,* she inadvertently triggered her own autistic meltdown onstage. "I noticed I was shaking," she writes, "and then I noticed that I was holding my breath, and then, when I tried to exhale I found my lungs were already empty." She describes it as "the most terrifying thing that could happen to me while performing" (334). The experience shaped the way Gadsby approached her project: she writes, "I am ashamed to admit that this was when I first understood that what I was attempting to do was quite dangerous, not just for my audience but also for me … [A]fter that first trial, I understood that before I could even attempt to walk that line, I had to make it safe for me" (336). But, how to do that? "I had barely articulated my question to myself before the answer made itself known, and it came in the form of a sound: my teacup hitting its saucer." For Gadsby, the solution was to counteract the negative triggers—narratives about violence and abuse she had experienced over the course of her life—with positive ones. By inserting into the show sounds and phrases with which she had positive associations, she was able to give herself the emotional anchors she needed in order to self-regulate, and to do her job. For Gadsby, these positive triggers are the sound of the clinking teacup, her impersonation of her mother, and the phrase "I am in my prime" (338).

When the time came for me to begin writing the chapters that make up this dissertation, I decided to adopt Gadsby's method.[2] My film references, my little jokes and tangential asides, the "interesting word usements I structure" (as per Steve Martin in *L.A. Story)*: these have all been selected to give me something to hold on to whenever I have begun to feel that the weight of the

[2] Well, part of it. Fans of Gadsby will know that in addition to selecting positive triggers to insert into her script, Gadsby also spent weeks of the writing process "under the influence of my best guess at micro-doses of MDMA" in order to create positive neurological associations with the selected triggers (337). I felt this wasn't the most appropriate choice for me.

project, to return to Hopkins, “whélms, whélms, ánd will end us.” For me, as for Gadsby, these interventions serve as a sort of formalized stimming. It’s possible that I might have inserted these positive triggers organically, had I not been aware of Gadsby’s process, but it’s just as possible that I wouldn’t have. By writing about how her autism influenced the technical and structural elements of her show, Gadsby provides one possible blueprint for autistic intellectual output. She is surely not the first to engage these methods, but I believe she is the first to articulate them, and to identify what she’s doing not as creative or quirky, but as a necessary accommodation, a support she requires in order to produce the level of work she wishes to.

As someone who has come to identify as autistic in her forties, I have related to *The Court Jester’s* Hawkins/Giacomo in yet another way: as the song that serves as an epigraph to this conclusion goes, with no one to teach me how to exist as a full-grown autistic person, and “[w]ith no other recourses but my own resources,” I’ve had to “make a fool of myself.” That is, I’ve had to learn what it means to inhabit this identity that has been so badly misjudged, misunderstood, and derided. My resources have been memoir, comedy, film, poetry (of course), and my own capacity for observation and analysis. The scholarship undertaken for this thesis, too, has been a resource, and a deeply instructive one. While standards about how non-autistic researchers ought to study their autistic research subjects have, thank goodness, begun to change over the last decade, there remains no scholarly or ethical framework for how autistic scholars are meant to study *ourselves.* We have had to, more or less, make it up as we go along. This is especially frustrating, given that the most valuable resource for the autistic critical autism studies researcher is their own autistic experience. I’m not particularly concerned about the impact my research has on how scholars read Hopkins, or Dickinson, or Murray, or Carson; if someone finds my chapters intriguing, that’s great, but it’s not the most important potential impact of this thesis. I am more

invested in altering how we read autism. Learning to read autism properly relies on listening to autistic people's insights and analyses. These insights and analyses are only available to be listened to when autistic people are supported in conducting and sharing our own research.

For me, the real value of this project is that it demonstrates that autistic researchers can conduct and present our research without compromising our authentic autistic ways of being. Autistic perspectives are desperately needed in the academic sphere; if our mannerisms, interests, utterances, affects, and habits are to be the subjects of scrutiny, we should at least be the ones to scrutinize them, and we should be allowed and encouraged to celebrate them as we go along. We need autistic perspectives to be broad, as well; like anything else in this world, autism looks and feels different, and is perceived differently, as it intersects with racial identity, class, culture, gender. The perspectives of non-speaking autistics will be different than those of the talkative crowd. The perspectives of racialized autistics will have been formed by different influences than mine have been as a white autistic person. All these factors shape us, and it is crucial that we recognize this fact as we teach the world how to read autism. My reading of autism can only ever be one reading. We need so many more. My hope is that this thesis will act as an invitation to current and future autistic scholars to engage with the work that thrills them and that fills them with joy and exuberance, and to do it on their terms—whatever that looks and sounds like. May my work serve as a positive trigger as they craft their own stories.

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