See It Feelingly
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See It Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor.

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Sooner or later in a reading life, one finds words are living things. Whether this knowledge comes by writing or reading, via reader-response theory or neuropsychoanalysis, hardly matters—a word or stanza (in the case of a poem) starts up from its page, extends broad wings, and reader and writer never forget it. In my case I read poems by D. H. Lawrence during a severe adolescent illness, a near-death experience, and found these simple lines to a torn pomegranate:

For my part, I prefer my heart to be broken.
It is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack.

Later I’d learn of Lawrence’s long struggle with tuberculosis and know him as a lyric poet of the body in crisis, but first encountering his pomegranate, I only knew the words were sharp as broken glass, cryptic, and then lifting. I’d never seen anything like it. That a man’s heart could be preferably broken was interesting enough to a disabled teen fighting to stay alive, but then the poem’s living words flew up and away from custom: it is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack. Wounds, I saw, could be the cracked doors of hope.

No adult had ever shared so much sharpened intimacy with me, not my teachers, not our local priest, certainly not my parents who held my blindness as something unmentionable whether in emotional or practical terms.

Lovely dawn-kaleidoscopic; torn skin of the fruit-heart-man; one who’s implicitly survived the night. If prior to this discovery words were quiescent, passive, easy to overlook, they were no longer.

In disability there are innumerable obstacles to having what we often call an empowered life—Helen Keller comes immediately to mind. When she sought admittance to Radcliffe College she was compelled to demonstrate her literacy.
and she endured tests designed to prove that her written words and her inner life were not her own. How could a blind-deaf woman who used an amanuensis to communicate have an authentic and self-directed capacity for language? In Keller’s case her natural talent with language was so far beyond the skills of her “teacher,” Annie Sullivan, the matter was settled, if not quickly, speedily enough.

My reception as a blind writer who can speak has been less onerous than Keller’s, though it’s not without its cringeworthy moments. During an interview for a teaching position at a major American university, a professor in the creative writing department asked how I could write so clearly about the world if I can’t see? Aside from its borderline illegality (did he think I was faking blindness?), the question revealed how little some contemporary writers understand what language does at its most fundamental level. That all nouns are images had never occurred to my questioner, a well-regarded fiction writer who presumably should have recognized what I said next: “I say strawberry, you see a strawberry; I say battleship, you’ll see it. Whether I’ve seen the poxy thing myself has no bearing on your reception—this is why poets were believed to be magical in ancient times.” Of course, blind people produce mental imagery just like sighted people, as contemporary neuroscience has demonstrated. A working retina is not required.

But literary language is often as much about the unseen as the seen. Accordingly, Milton was the right poet to describe the vaults of hell. But what’s more interesting is the evident and often mysterious joy that comes from sensing the unseeable or unnameable in our reading. Joy is not always or invariably concerned with custom. Pablo Neruda, who spent many years alone as a young man traveling with the Chilean Foreign Service, wrote,

I grew accustomed to stubborn lands
where nobody ever asked me
whether I like lettuces
or if I prefer mint
like the elephants devour.

And from offering no answers,
I have a yellow heart.

In literary consciousness solitude is always instructive. Filtered through Neruda’s imagination, it’s both figuratively improbable and unforgettable.
There’s a growing acknowledgment among readers familiar with writers like Oliver Sacks and Steve Silberman that people with autism (who prefer, rightly, to be called autistics or autists) innately grasp the elephant’s mint and its influence on the yellow heart with nary a wink. Or with many winks. Like the blind, they haven’t been asked too many questions either and, until recently, have offered few answers. But the times, as Bob Dylan famously sang, “they are a-changin’.”

In See It Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor, the poet and memoirist Ralph James Savarese has engaged with people on the spectrum, not to study them, not to inflict upon them the Keller test, but to explore classic literature with men and women who know a great deal about solitude, the crack in the pomegranate, the dawn-kaleidoscopic, and the silent wounds in lovely hearts. One can’t help but feel while reading this remarkable book the wonder of reading truly. I was reminded of Paulo Freire’s dictum: “Nobody studies authentically who does not take the critical position of being the subject of curiosity, of the reading, of the process of discovery.” Emily Dickinson put it like this:

He ate and drank the precious words,
His spirit grew robust;
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was dust.
He danced along the dingy days,
And this bequest of wings
Was but a book. What liberty
A loosened spirit brings!

This is a volume about reading unlike any I’ve ever encountered. Put away those pernicious clichés and stereotypes of autism. Autistics lack theory of mind. . . . Autistics suffer from linguistic impairment. . . . Autistics cannot engage in imaginative play. . . . Follow along as a nonspeaking man from Austin, Texas, swims through Moby-Dick to tell his own sensory story. Or watch a cyberpunk writer and computer programmer from Portland, Oregon, track the empathetic failings of Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? who “retires” six escaped androids. Like these androids, autistics are said to lack empathy.

What do neurodivergent minds bring to novel reading? Plenty. Their oft-reported talent for “thinking in pictures” may even provide a leg up in literature’s “cinema of emotions.”
W. H. Auden once remarked that “as readers, most of us, to some degree, are like those urchins who pencil moustaches on the faces of girls in advertisements.” But what if we’re the pencil, the urchin, the girl, the advertisement, the mustache, without the drag anchor of uncertainty? That is, what if no reader is neurotypical? Wouldn’t masterful neuro-atypical readers then become mentors in whose authority we can derive much profit? This is at its very core one of the most probative and imaginative recognitions we can “brave”—that all writers and readers are more complicated and surprising than we’ve customarily known.

Stephen Kuusisto