See It Feelingly

Savarese, Ralph James

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“Hands in your pocket, Tito! Hands in your pocket!” Soma said in her customary manner. We had just climbed the stairs of Arrowhead, Herman Melville’s farmhouse-turned-museum in western Massachusetts, and we were about to enter the great author’s study. Tito struggles with perseverative behavior, especially around books, and Soma, his mother, feared that he might touch something he wasn’t allowed to touch. Like a cage for small birds, the pockets of his pants would offer some resistance to his fluttering fingers.

Melville had lived at Arrowhead from 1850 to 1863, and he had written the epic tale for which he is famous, *Moby-Dick*, along with the novel *Pierre* and stories such as “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and “Benito Cereno,” just a few feet from where we were standing. The writing table, we learned from our guide, wasn’t original, but the view from the window certainly was. Mount Greylock, of the Taconic mountain range, loomed in “excellent majesty,” as Melville once wrote. Though it was only late October and nothing but fallen leaves blanketed the ground, I could imagine the scene in winter: snow-covered Greylock breaching the treeline like the hump of a giant, white sperm whale.

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*From a World as Fluid as the Sea*

You must learn to heed your senses. Humans use but a tiny percentage of theirs. They barely look, they rarely listen, they never smell, and they think that they can only experience feelings through their skin. But they talk, oh, do they talk.

— Michael Scott, *The Alchemyst*
To the right of the table, an iron harpoon leaned against the wall; to the left, a door led to a small bedroom in which Nathaniel Hawthorne had slept when visiting Melville. Hawthorne's proximity to the study seemed terrifically apt. Melville had once thanked the older writer, who some believe encouraged him to turn a typical whaling yarn into a gloomy metaphysical adventure, for “dropping germanous seeds in [his] soul.” On the writing table itself lay a copy of *Moby-Dick*, opened to the “Mast-head” chapter. “There you stand,” Ishmael tells us in the chapter, “a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath you and between your legs . . . swim the hugest monsters of the sea” (151). Mast-head watchmen must “sing out every time” (153) they see a whale or a ship or an approaching storm. Skilled watchmen, I had read, could not only spot a whale some eight miles away, but also discern what kind of whale it was by virtue of the spout.

Before Soma or I could stop them, the birds in Tito’s pockets got loose. They flitted above the desk, lifting up the book and encouraging his nose to inspect the contents. If one sensory modality predominates in Tito, it is smell, which is often the case in autism. The senses are generally heightened in the condition and not conventionally integrated. In a bit of daily writing produced while reading *Moby-Dick* with me, he had blithely reported, “Whenever I get hold of a book, I sniff through the pages. After that I look at what those pages show. Some people question my unique engagement with books. I answer them by sniffing more books, inviting them to join me in the search for a whale-like smell.”

In the same piece of writing, he had recalled auditioning for a job at a bookstore. Because he was a published author and loved to read, some higher-up in his school district—Tito was a nonspeaking, special-ed student with classical or “severe” autism—had thought he should spend his adult days around books. “All senses riding the one sense of smell, I entered the store,” he’d recounted. “Rowing my nose, I halted in front of a shelf. The smell of books intensified. There was plenty to do with my nose.” As his potential employers looked on, he proceeded to sniff volume after volume—from *Horticulture for Professionals* to *Tax Law for Dummies*. He was the Russian writer Gogol’s man without a nose, Major Kovalyov. Rather, he was the nose itself, insisting on a readerly life for nostrils.

In a nod to the biblical story of Jonah, Tito had written, “The vital smell of those books kept me alive in the stomach of the store.” He breathed in the glorious odor of the pages and breathed out what he called “unnecessary
social consciousness.” By that he meant his knowledge of proper comport-
ment. “The thought that I was somewhere being observed by curious sets of
eyes, which pondered my ability to work at a bookstore, was breathed out,
too,” he’d added. The young man was lost—or, maybe from another perspec-
tive, found—in smell.

“It wasn’t my idea to work there,” Tito had explained, annoyed as much
by his lack of employment possibilities as by the fact that he was always at
the mercy of other people’s ideas—whether those people were school admin-
istrators, autism professionals, or the average, gawking Joe on the bus. How
could he work in a bookstore? That would be like having an arsonist work in
a match factory or a harpooner work in the Boston Aquarium! “Why can’t I
just be a writer?” he’d complained, which was, of course, the lament of many
a scrivener before him.

Needless to say, Tito didn’t get the job. His nose had been too much in the
product, even if that product was a book and even if certain books—novels,
say, or volumes of poems—demand of both writer and reader profound sen-
sory engagement. As we stood in Melville’s study, that very same nose was too
much in the “Mast-head” chapter. It was sniffing out whales beneath the sur-
face of the page. Who needs vision when you have a schnoz! Soma gasped
and quickly took the tome out of Tito’s hands. Although I had arranged the
trip, including this private tour of Arrowhead, and was in theory responsible
for Tito’s actions, I secretly relished his olfactory panache. My friend was
excited. We had just spent seventeen months reading and discussing Moby-
Dick by Skype, two chapters a week, and here we were in Melville’s house,
the book of books before us.

I first met Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay in the summer of 2008, when
he was nineteen years old. I was interviewing him for a project on neurodi-
versity at his home in Austin, Texas. Anyone who knew anything about the
classical form of the “disorder” knew about Tito. If Temple Grandin had
become the face of relatively minimal impairment in autism, then Tito had
become the face—the promising face—of significant impairment. His story
is really quite extraordinary.

He grew up in Mysore and Bangalore, India, where at the time autism
was considered a form of psychosis. Repeatedly refused admission to school,
he was educated at home by his mother. As a boy, he traveled to England to
be evaluated by scientists affiliated with the National Autistic Society—in
particular, Lorna Wing and Judith Gould, “legends of autism research,” as Tito once referred to them. A significant challenge to the notion of “mental retardation” in the “severely” autistic, he quickly became something of a sensation. At age twelve, he published his first book, *Beyond the Silence*, in the United Kingdom. (In its American publication three years later, it would have the title *The Mind Tree.*) On the back cover of the book, the neurologist Oliver Sacks gushed, “Amazing, shocking, too, for it has usually been assumed that deeply autistic people are scarcely capable of introspection or deep thought, let alone of poetic or metaphoric leaps of imagination. . . . Tito gives the lie to all of these assumptions, and forces us to reconsider the condition of the deeply autistic.”

A writer friend of mine has labeled the book “Mozartian”—it’s that precocious. In the section that gives the American edition its title, a banyan tree, with no way of communicating its awareness, yearns to ask a man who sits in the shade it provides why he is sad. “I have been gifted this mind,” the tree says. “I can hope, I can imagine, I can love, but I cannot ask.” Clearly a figure for the nonspeaking autistic, the tree has trouble relating thought to embodiment: “My concerns . . . are trapped . . . somewhere in my depths, maybe in my roots, maybe in my bark or maybe all around my radius.” While the prose is quite lyrical, the book is peppered with actual poetry—sometimes Tito stops midsentence to offer a verse. At the conclusion of *The Mind Tree* appear poems that he wrote for a BBC documentary about his life. In one, Tito the tourist wittily takes in the sights:

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Tower of London
Strong as death
Breathing the echoes of last breaths
Of those punished by the law
Their misty breath is what I saw
And there’s Big Ben. Big Ben
Telling us now is when
And Churchill Churchill standing there
In the chill
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After describing the typical London tumult—“people of busy mood / . . . under the cloudy skies”—the poem concludes:

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I did not manage to see the Queen
Yet her palace with grave discipline
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Stood since yonder ages thus
I saluted it from the red bus

With the success of his book and the BBC documentary, the autism world saluted Tito. He received an invitation from Cure Autism Now (CAN; it would later merge with Autism Speaks) to come to Los Angeles. The plan was for him to serve as a high-profile figure for the organization and for his mother to help other nonspeaking children with autism learn to communicate. Although not the first classical autist to demonstrate his intelligence, he was marketed as such, and because Soma had taught him how to write and to type with his own hand unaided, the experts took notice. “Tito is for real,” Dr. Michael Merzenich, a neuroscientist at the University of San Francisco Medical School, insisted in a New York Times article from 2002. “He unhesitatingly responds to factual questions about books that he has read or about experiences that he has had in . . . high fidelity.” “I’ve seen Tito sit in front of an audience of scientists and take questions from the floor,” Dr. Matthew Belmonte, an autism expert at Cambridge University, reported in the same article. “He taps out intelligent, witty answers on a laptop with a voice synthesizer. No one is touching him. He communicates on his own.”

Soma called the technique that she had pioneered with Tito the “rapid prompting method” (RPM). As her website puts it, “RPM uses a ‘Teach-Ask’ paradigm for eliciting responses through intensive verbal, auditory, visual and/or tactile prompts.” It shouldn’t be thought of as “mere pointing at a letter board,” she says, though learning to put a pencil through the board’s cut-out letters is what the technique has come to be associated with. In order to overcome significant sensory-processing disturbances as well as profound motor planning (and initiating) challenges, Soma first employs a range of exercises designed to capture the nonspeaking autist’s attention, to engage him or her cognitively, and to ground the idea of volition in the body. The constant verbal commands, issued at a pace that matches the person’s self-stimulatory behavior (rocking, say, or finger-flicking), plug into and override that rhythm. Once the autist is using the letter board and has mastered spelling out words, Soma begins to ask him or her questions: at first, simple fact-based questions and then more complicated, open-ended ones. Ultimately, the goal is independent writing and typing—the letter board lays a kind of communicative foundation.

Eventually Soma and Tito left CAN; Tito loathed its cure agenda. While the organization was all too happy to champion his “miraculous breakthrough,”
its primary mission was to eradicate autism, and it knew no bounds in deploying fear as a fundraising vehicle. In *The Mind Tree*, Tito wrote, “I dream that we can grow in a matured society where nobody would be ‘normal or abnormal’ but just human beings, accepting any other human being—ready to grow together.” He would later recount, “I was astonished by Mother’s involvement with the belief that autism is a disease and needs a cure. Mother had always believed in my thoughts and judgment before. How could she participate in a system that classified me as sick? Did mother really think I was less of a person?” When they at last extricated themselves from CAN, they moved to Austin and established HALO, an RPM clinic.

While Soma offered instruction at HALO, Tito spent the day in a self-contained, special-ed classroom—basically a holding pen for people with cognitive disabilities. There was no place else for him to go when she was at work: he needed an aide to support him, and Soma, a single mother who hadn’t yet become a U.S. citizen, couldn’t fight to include him in regular education or manage that inclusion once it had been established. It seemed preposterous that someone this talented—this well known in the autism world—could be consigned to such a fate. With a sort of heartbreaking pragmatism, he acceded to the indignities of special education. Before leaving for work, and after returning, Soma would tutor Tito. They would do an hour and a half of humanities and then an hour and a half of science. They would make of necessity a virtue. Who needed a typical education when a more rigorous one could be provided at home?

If my son’s inclusion had taught me anything, it was that it hugely benefited from, if not demanded, two parents and enormous economic and cultural capital—things that Tito lacked. My wife, Emily, had given up her career as an inclusion specialist to manage DJ’s own inclusion. No one knew better than I how chancy life could be: my son, who had lived in poverty and who had been diagnosed as “profoundly mentally retarded,” was now an upper-middle-class honors student at our local high school. Some kids get lucky, and some do not—there was no ignoring this simple, unforgiving truth. The fact that DJ had in effect won the lottery only mocked the ordinary failure of our educational and economic systems. In a poem called “Hap,” the British poet Thomas Hardy writes, “Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .” For nearly a year after we adopted DJ, the Florida Department of Children and Family Services would call at dinnertime to see if we might take another kid. My exasperated “no’s were a course in bitter realism.
Homeschooling had obviously worked for Tito—at the time of our interview he had just published a third book—but I sensed that he still pined for the social acceptance and stimulation that come with a typical education. While other young people were off at college, he was aging out of special education, and it wasn’t clear what he would do during the day while Soma worked. In response to an interviewer’s question about the essential attributes of a welcoming school, he had once declared in verse:

My school is the open dream
My words find hard to say.
My school is the doubt in your eyes
And my withdrawing away.
My school is the summer dust grain
I saw coming through my window,
Trying to find a way to my room,
Then disappearing in an obscure shadow.

“What happens to a dream deferred?” Langston Hughes famously asked. Behind Tito’s lines lurked a long history of rejection—what the blind writer Stephen Kuusisto calls “the hourly ache of not belonging.”

In The Mind Tree, Tito had recounted any number of humiliating scenes with potential educators. I remembered one as we conversed in his living room:

“Here we go again,” I told myself and pushed aside the words by wiping the air. . . . Why should boys like me need schools? After all, how can we be taught, since we have lost our minds? . . . I watched the words toss in the air like bubbles of soap all around me. They arranged and re-arranged themselves . . . and I laughed aloud. “See why I told you,” the teacher [said] . . . pointing towards me. . . . I walked out of the school, with a tail of words following me. Words made of letters, crawling like ants in a disciplined row.

By giving the teacher’s words a visual presence, Tito plaintively gestured at the education he was denied; it’s as if the air were a blackboard. He also revealed the sensory basis of autistic thought—just how palpable language is to him. For many an educator, comportment, sadly, means everything. And yet, as the woman’s demeaning words followed him into his life, they became, I thought to myself, the very words that, through his tenacious homeschooling, now fill his books.

How to describe the peculiar expression of Tito’s sorrow? His was an orderly disappointment. Like the verbal insolence of a soldier, it hid beneath
a uniform, manifesting itself only in a slight perturbation of tone. At one point in our interview, he called me a Marxist. I had been lamenting the plight of poor families whose children have autism. Drawing a distinction between the two of us, he scribbled, “Activists revolt while I explain.” I reminded him of the passages in his work that argue against the cure proponents and instead insist on opportunities for those with autism. “I explain passionately,” he clarified. I got the impression that he was doing a kind of dance, a “Texas two-step,” in which the leader, Resignation, and the follower, Hope, move counterclockwise around the floor.

About his relationship with Soma, who was both sun and moon, earth’s everlasting companion, Tito had offered the aforementioned interviewer this couplet: “Me and Mother a fine pair / In the world a strange affair.” He’d then added, “How we manage, how we fare / As we bargain with despair.” Soma had a reputation for being a taskmaster, someone who really pushed Tito to achieve—Tito himself had said as much in print. As I would get to know her, I would certainly see this aspect of her personality. Her tough, no-nonsense exterior met the world head-on and either maneuvered around, or compensated for, its ignorance. A chemist in India, she had been on the verge of a promising university career when Tito was diagnosed with autism. She had clearly taught herself not to complain but instead to labor and then labor some more.

While Tito was accustomed to the demand for emotional candor in his writing, Soma did not waste time on feelings, either positive or negative. The latter, of course, were the natural response of a parent whose child had autism in India. Stigma swirled around that child like a stubborn monsoon, and services, if they existed at all, were woefully inadequate. No one had worked harder to educate her son, and yet, in some ways, she had taught him to expect so little. He would write books, he would “be somebody,” in her words, but would he have friends or a life in the world? I know, easy for me to say. Many would contend that I have taught my son to expect too much. When DJ would start thinking about college and would end up falling in love with Oberlin, my wife and I would figure out how to make his dream happen, even if it meant living apart so that she could support him in Ohio. Empowering one’s child is a privilege, a hugely expensive one.

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AS THE INTERVIEW in Austin ended, Tito stunned his mother and me by making a request. “I want to be your student,” he wrote. Feeling the pathos
of the moment, yet not knowing how to respond, I was initially flippant. “Well, come to Iowa,” I said. I knew full well that he couldn’t come to Iowa. I also knew that he was taking a chance: he risked being disappointed again. The fact that he was directly asking a stranger—not any stranger, of course; I’d adopted DJ and written a lot about neurodiversity, but still someone he didn’t know—to be his teacher must have felt like jumping out of a plane: the sturdy floor of pride giving way to plunging want. After a long and somewhat desperate pause, I suggested that we could work together by Skype. Truth be told, I had no idea what I was proposing; I had never taught by Skype; in fact, I rarely used it personally.

Moreover, it wasn’t clear that Tito could sit for an hour (or longer) in front of a computer screen. He had great difficulty controlling himself. Temple Grandin describes her first encounter with him—Tito was twelve at the time—as a contest between his “acting self” and his “thinking self.” Wanting to see how Tito used language, Grandin showed him a photograph of an astronaut-equestrian. “What is that?” she asked him.

_Apollo II on a horse_, he typed rapidly.

Then he ran around the library flapping his arms.

When he returned to the keyboard, I showed him a picture of a cow.

_We don’t eat those in India_, he typed.

I asked him another question, but I no longer remember what it was. Still, you know what happened next, Tito answered it, and then he ran around the library flapping his arms.

And that was it for the conversation. Tito had done as much writing as he could in one session. He needed to rest, because even answering three short questions required tremendous effort.

Tito’s thinking self had lost out to his acting self, “the self,” as Grandin puts it, “that the outside world sees: a spinning, flailing, flapping boy.”

In a composition inspired by the white whale, Tito would describe the obstacle to distance learning in his own way. Painting the land, with its reliable solidity, as the terrain of neurotypicals, and the sea, with its continuous tumult, as the terrain of autistics, he would lament his shipwrecked body—in particular what he called his “tactile defensiveness”:

The Moby Dick of disorders swims within you. No see-saw can be as intense as the see-saw of hyper- and hyposensitivity, rocking you from one end to the other, lifting you up, dropping you down, then lifting
you up again—throughout the ocean of days, months and years that we call life. Awake, you feel the fish under your feet; asleep, you feel the slimy eel under your back. No matter how much you pace yourself or rock your body to compensate, the see-saw finds your nerves and rocks you ever more furiously into an exhausted self. You grow old as a wave—fluid and always displaced.

As anyone familiar with the autobiographical literature knows, autistics have been reporting inadequate or excessive sensory input for years, and many have pointed to this fact (and the anxiety it causes) as the reason for their purportedly bizarre behavior, such as stimming, rocking, or flapping. Grandin explains, “Auditory and tactile input often overwhelmed me. Loud noises hurt my ears. When noise and sensory stimulation became too intense, I was able to shut off my hearing and retreat into my own world.” According to her, nine out of ten autistics struggle with at least one sensory disorder—often multiple disorders. Tito struggles at times with sound, but touch and vision—in particular, a propensity to see too much detail—drive him mad. While smell is a delight, it is frequently too much of a delight. “I think very few people see the sensory connection,” he would later tell me in one of our Skype sessions. Instead, experts have postulated a series of innate deficits—from impaired awareness of self and others to impaired communication and imagination—that may in fact be attributable to sensory disturbances. Remediating such difficulties, many autistics contend, can facilitate skills in these areas.

Although she had taught him how to do all sorts of exceedingly difficult things, such as to write and to type independently, even Soma doubted whether Tito could manage regular Skype sessions. But he had done well during the interview, getting up only a few times and remaining admirably focused. I kept thinking, Maybe he will get comfortable. Recalling the times that I had underestimated my son and knowing that the possible always depends on the imagination and inventiveness of those who would presume to define it, I said, “Let’s give Skype a try.” Tito remembers the moment like this: “My high school years passed with the tides—high and low. My education continued at home through books in philosophy and science. Then there was opportunity. Professor Savarese saw me differently and agreed to accept me as his student.” Little did I know that I would be embarking on one of the most rewarding teaching experiences of my career, an experience that continues to this day.
We began with a private, weekly tutorial and, over the course of several years, read and discussed all manner of essays, stories, novels, and poems. After the success of the private tutorial, I proposed that Tito join an actual creative-writing course at Grinnell. “I’ll project your face onto the wall,” I told him. “That way the other students can see you, and you can feel like you’re part of the class.” Aside from some nervous gestures, such as twirling a pencil and occasionally taking a book off of a shelf and smelling it while I spoke, he was commendably composed. I could tell how much effort it took to suppress the wilder habits of classical autism, but I could also tell how much he wanted a taste of inclusive education. Clearly, the engine of desire has more horsepower than we think. Tito loved the experience—almost as much as my students. They found his workshop comments, which he typed on the Skype sidebar, to be quite helpful, and after reading his published work, they relished the opportunity to study “next” to him. The class went so well that he ended up taking two more creative-writing courses by Skype. He even established email friendships with a number of the students. In between, and after, these courses, we continued with our private tutorial.

When he later reflected on being included—we had just set out on the Pequod with Ishmael and Queequeg, and he had begun to appropriate the novel’s watery setting to evoke his experience of autism—he remarked, “Where there is a will, there is a way. I wasn’t sure how my senses would cope with a two-hour long class. But when the wind is calm and assurance floats in the air, the sea grows calm. I lasted in front of the computer screen and all boats sailed smooth. Students accepted me, and finally I found the coast.” With our little virtual classroom anchored just offshore, we forged a compromise. “Students accepted me”—in that simple statement you can hear the answer to a prayer.

I remember, very early on, becoming terrifically excited: He could take an actual class! He could get a bachelor’s degree or a master’s of fine arts! Why wasn’t he attending the University of Iowa Writers Workshop? While I was drunk on possibility, Tito was parceling out hope the way a hiker lost in the wilderness parcels out a candy bar. He was still doing that Texas two-step—maybe the follower was now Resignation, but the leader, Hope, understood the limitations of the dance. The more we read of Moby Dick, the more inclusion seemed to him a question of natural habitat:

Let me tell you the reason why I am not the right person to be educated in a classroom. I am an isolated whale for reasons beyond my
control. I have autism and learning with typical mammals will not work for me. I need more territory due to my tactile-defensiveness. Even the rising temperature of the bodies around me in a classroom might cook me up. There is also the problem of my auditory sensitivity: if I were to hear a breathing sound from someone on my left or perhaps a secret gulp from someone on my right, I might not have any control over those sounds boring deep into my cerebrum. They might expand inside me, their decibel-level increasing, beginning a butterfly effect—dragging me from the coast like a riptide, then dumping me on a distant island resembling the smooth back of a white whale. Between me and the continent called a classroom far away would be the sea and its rolling waves. Above, would be questions like gulls hovering in the sky.

Actual inclusion would be too disruptive, Tito suggests. It could provoke a meltdown at once embarrassing to him and incomprehensible to his teacher and classmates. Summing up his sensory distortions, he once joked, “Strange is truther in autism.”

When I pressed him, he conceded that there were other obstacles to inclusion besides sensory overload: “I long ago gave up on the terrestrial world of an inclusive classroom because I was unwelcome and because I was too proud to beg. To the principals of the various schools who closed their doors to me, I was a sea mammoth. They could not recognize anything but typical: their zoos were spilling over with typical students.” Because he was “from a world as fluid as the sea,” he would need “special accommodation to fit in the classroom-land of promises.” That accommodation would have to be both material—Tito, for example, despite his auditory sensitivity, prefers to have his assignments read aloud—and attitudinal. His teachers would have to be able to see talent in another form and want him in the classroom. They would have to be willing to overlook autistic idiosyncrasies and the occasional bad day. Without these things, inclusion won’t work.

With a mixture of pride and regret, Ishmael tells us in *Moby-Dick*, “A whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (114). (Melville, too, was denied a secondary education and took to sea as a common sailor.) Tito adopted Ishmael’s cheerful stoicism, turning the limitations of our virtual relationship into a kind of advantage: “And so I began to sharpen my harpoons behind the computer screen. There are harpooners who chase college degrees. Harpooners like me chase whales, hoping to catch the perfect
whale in the shape of literature.” Skype became a marvelous way to encounter *Moby-Dick*, especially as Tito settled on the novel’s phantom antagonist as his primary figure of identification. It was as if I were a mast-head watchman and he a leviathan, each of us spotting the other at a great distance and singing out with enthusiasm: “Hello, Tito”; “Hello, professor.” When the connection faltered and the picture blurred, this seemed especially true—the wavy lines like seas in rough weather.

Our tutorial, though, was not so much a hunt as a cooperative undertaking between man and whale, neurotypical and autist. We were rewriting the story of Captain Ahab’s demonic quest as we read it, page by blustery page. Tito described our process:

> We each have Skype accounts and use them to discuss the novel face to face. Once a week, we spread the worded whale out in front of us; we dissect its head, eyes, and bones, careful not to hurt or kill it. The Professor and I are not whale hunters. We are not letting the whale die. We are shaping it, letting it swim through the Web with a new and polished look. I see the Professor’s face floating on the computer screen; I see my face in a smaller box below, wondering about its projected image. Perhaps my face like Moby Dick floats on his computer screen.

Students sometimes complain that studying literature kills it. Tito understood the purpose of our discussions, which he wittily contrasted with the whale’s gruesome slaughter and dismemberment. The reassembled novel moved in our conversations like the great mammal itself. Breaching the surface, its complexity glistened in the light of our shared engagement. This was precisely the sort of critical appreciation that I try to teach my students at Grinnell.

... when our tour of Arrowhead was complete, we descended the stairs and walked out to the barn behind the house: there were t-shirts to buy in the gift shop. The one that Tito chose said, “I Prefer Not To,” which was, of course, a line from “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Mine said, “What Would Queequeg Do?,” which was, of course, a twist on the popular Christian saying “What would Jesus do?” For me, part of *Moby-Dick*’s appeal lay precisely in Ishmael’s decision to befriend the Polynesian harpooner—over and against what his culture, and importantly his religion, told him about “savages.”

In the beginning of the novel, as the *Pequod* is being prepared for its voyage, the two must share a bed at the Spouter Inn, and after getting riled
up about the “wild cannibal [with] tomahawk between his teeth” (39), Ishmael declares, “What’s all this fuss I have been making about . . . the man’s a human being just as I am” (40). The next morning, he comically awakens to find “Queequeg’s pagan arm thrown round [him]” (42); try as he might, he can’t “unlock his bridegroom clasp” (42). The harpooner “hugged me tightly” (42), Ishmael says, furthering the matrimonial conceit, “as though naught but death should part us twain” (42). Some ten chapters (and a few adventures) later, he cryptically alludes to the Pequod’s demise—Ishmael, of course, was the only survivor: “I clove to Queequeg like a barnacle, yea, till poor Queequeg took his long last dive” (72). The novel makes a powerful case for embracing differences of all kinds.

After snapping some final photographs and conversing with the Arrowhead staff, we drove to the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield to see the library’s Melville Room. Among other things, it contained a pair of Turkish slippers, which the author had used as a kind of tobacco pouch and which had originally hung from a hook on the fireplace at Arrowhead. Tito did some more book-sniffing at the Athenaeum—it was a library, after all—and I continued to marvel at the accoutrement of Melville’s life. We then got back in the car and drove several hours to Mystic, Connecticut, where we had an appointment to see the Charles W. Morgan, the world’s only remaining wooden whaling vessel and a close approximation of the Pequod. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, a historian of whaling, Melville scholar, and Mystic Seaport staff member, had kindly offered to give us a tour.

I had promised Tito that we would take such a trip after we finished Moby-Dick. I longed not only to celebrate our readerly adventure but also to give him something to which he could look forward. In addition, I thought that seeing the Charles W. Morgan would make the novel come to life. When I later reflected on this assumption, I recognized both its neurotypical bias and its undercutting of the very premise of imaginative literature. With respect to the latter, wasn’t it the writer’s job to evoke the Pequod, to make the reader feel as if he were walking its decks or rigging its sails or manning its boats? Who needed to board an actual whale ship? With respect to the former, wasn’t it the neurotypical, always greeting the world with the prow of his frontal lobes, and not the autist, who required such sensory enhancement? I don’t want to make these points too strenuously—I understand the value of historical appreciation—but nor do I want to ignore what contemporary neuroscience is beginning to tell us about autism, on the one hand, and about the reading of literature, on the other.
Autistics struggle to subdue the sensory; I hope that much is clear. The reason that Soma took so many photographs of Arrowhead and would take still more of Mystic Seaport was to aid Tito in processing what he encountered. In a new environment, he can’t readily establish “global coherence.” He sees bits and pieces of things, micro-facets. By looking at the photographs after the fact, the categorical elements—what both subordinate and organize the sensory for neurotypicals—can begin to emerge. Imagine Tito scrutinizing a picture of Melville’s bedroom: *Yes, that was the bed in which Herman and his wife, Lizzie, slept. That was the cradle beside the bed. The mattress, I now remember, rested on ropes. The guide said, “That’s where the phrase ‘Sleep Tight’ comes from.”*

Here’s an actual example: “Fallen leaves and scarecrow sculptures surrounded Arrowhead. The house floated on a sea of chilled air, anchored like a ship to the end of October. Mount Greylock in the distance was the tomb of Moby Dick.” In this particular photograph, Soma had captured the grounds around the house—an artist had populated the lawn with lifelike people made of straw.

In another, photocopies of the author’s work, in his own difficult script, lay scattered on a table: “Pages saved between then and now like shreds from the sails of a ship that constantly fought the storm of rejection.” I had reminded Tito, as we stood there looking at those “shreds,” that one reviewer had called *Moby-Dick* “so much trash.” (Later, after our trip, I would ask him what he had learned: “I can feel the rejection, the determination, and all that we heard about Melville, and I realize I’m not the only person in the world whom I must pity.”)

For Tito, looking at something unfamiliar thus required a series of steps. Experience set the process in motion; photographs allowed him to calmly and patiently reconstruct the scene; writing allowed him to make sense of what he saw. These lyrical reflections were not something projected retrospectively onto visual facts; they helped to bring these facts into existence.

So, what might contemporary neuroscience tell us about Tito’s visual proclivities? A team at the University of Montreal led by Laurent Mottron has proposed a theory of enhanced perceptual functioning (EPF) in autism. By “perceptual,” Mottron means the low-level mechanics of sensing, not what the brain does with that input. According to the theory, in autism “perception . . . play[s] a prominent, if not always beneficial, role across a range of areas of functioning, including language and problem-solving and reasoning.” A relative lack of “top-down processing influences on perceptual
systems” allows these systems to operate with a kind of autonomy. Imagine your nose or your eyes or your ears commandeering your mind: “It’s a sensory hijacking! Nobody move!” If you recall, autistics disproportionately use posterior sensory regions of the brain to think.

One result is what Tito terms “hyperfocusing.” He sees an immense amount of detail, so much more detail than his nonautistic counterparts, which can overwhelm him. “Hyperfocusing makes the world seem shattered,” he explains: “I would say the world is shattered. Underlooking makes it seem whole.” It’s easy to understand how “underlooking” would constitute an advantage in most contexts—who wants, for example, to inspect the wood grain of the planks that make up the Morgan to the exclusion of the masts and sails—but it does come at a cost, one that neurotypicals admittedly don’t think too much about. Our capacity for generalization depends on abstraction, which is to say, “the act of considering something as a general quality or characteristic, apart from concrete realities.” We let our categories—our homogenized, frontal-lobe sense of the world—do much of our seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching for us. Particularity gets lost. In this way, trying to enliven a whaling narrative by showing Tito the Morgan made little sense, at least until he had become comfortable with what he was seeing.

As important, the novel didn’t need enlivening, if by enlivening we mean a palpable alternative to the abstraction of language. Language, scientists are learning, is far more embodied than anybody previously thought, especially literary language, which strives less to denote experience than to re-create it. Indeed, literature might be defined as purposefully simulative sensing. There is little difference in the brain, it turns out, between organic and artificial sensory stimuli. “Visual imagery,” write Vittorio Gallese and Hannah Wojciehowksi, “is somehow equivalent to . . . an actual visual experience, and motor imagery is also somehow equivalent to . . . an actual motor experience.” Accordingly, the distinction between the world as it is presented to us in reality and the world as it is presented to us in a novel becomes harder to maintain. Autistics, who excel at thinking in pictures, sounds, touches, and smells, bring to linguistic comprehension an obdurate attachment to mental imagery. Call it the upside of “liv[ing] in the sensory,” as Donna Williams puts it. Might autistics, in this respect, be the perfect readers of literature?

A study from 2006 helps to clarify the attachment to mental imagery in autism. In the study, researchers compared how autistics and neurotypicals process high- and low-imagery sentences. For example, “The number 8, rotated 90 degrees, looks like a pair of glasses.” To comprehend this high-imagery
sentence, you must activate not only your traditional language centers but also your parietal lobes, which integrate sensory information and facilitate spatial awareness, and your occipital lobes, which enable both sight and the production of visual mental imagery. You must, in effect, pull John Lennon—or, rather, the kind of spectacles he wore—out of the picture-making, three-dimensional hat that is your head! In the high-imagery setting, autistic and neurotypical brains looked most alike to the functional magnetic resonance imaging (or fMRI) scanner, though the former activated sensory regions more than the latter.

In the low-imagery setting, however, where “sentences . . . did not refer to spatial objects or relations”—for instance, “18 minus 11 equals 7”—autistics continued to rely on mental imagery. They continued to read, that is, in 3D mode, though the sentences themselves did not present visuospatial images. Neurotypicals, in contrast, activated only their traditional language centers. Although scientists found no difference in the error rate or response time of the two groups, they interpreted autistic processing as underconnected and inefficient. It never occurred to them that there might be different ways of skinning a higher order cognitive cat or that diminished sensory thinking in neurotypicals could ever be a problem, let alone a kind of disability.

For neurotypicals, a wealth of neuroimaging data has confirmed “a greater involvement of sensory . . . areas in concrete word processing . . . and a more focal activation of . . . ‘language’ areas for function words as well as abstract nouns.” This distinction in part underlies the pleasure, and indeed the power, of literature, which by eschewing abstract diction encourages the reader to produce mental imagery and thus to feel the story with her body. When reading literature, your brain is like an old-fashioned movie house: the words on the page are the nerdy yet film-loving projectionist. As one literary critic has argued, appealing to the work of Elaine Scarry, “The ‘great sensory writers’ endow their visual images with the vivacity of live perception. . . . Readers mentally produce images ‘under the instruction’” of the writer.

Could there be a better description of the experience of reading Moby-Dick? Virtually every line contains an imagistic feast. Listen, for example, to Ishmael’s description of a sunset, which hints at the whaleman’s long estrangement from family: “The starred nights seemed haughty dames in jeweled velvets, nursing at home in lonely pride, the memory of their absent conquering Earls, the golden helmed suns!” (127). (In his notes for the day’s discussion, Tito wrote, “Another great visual picture for the occipital cortex.”) Or listen to his description of the air, which, like the biblical Delilah, plots to rob the
sea of its physical strength: “The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all pervading azure; only the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson’s chest in his sleep” (474).

“The writer who merely goes for meaning does nothing but calculate,” Michel Serres insists. “He can only be said to write when all the senses tremble within the flesh of language, . . . a double variety for sight, touch, smell and taste.” Literature is our linguistic lifeline to the body: it not only simulates the real, but it also re-presents it in ways that disrupt our habits of perception. We might even say that literature is the autistic version of language, whose spoken and written forms become more abstract as the typical person ages.

Even figures of speech, that important staple of literature, elicit mental imagery. A recent study found that, when processing metaphors, we recruit the appropriate sensory cortex in the back of our heads, not simply our traditional language centers in the front. In the study, sentences containing textural metaphors—“I had a rough day”—activated the parietal operculum, a region responsible for sensing texture, whereas literal sentences matched for meaning—“I had a bad day”—did not. “I had a rough day,” in other words, took hold in the body. The day was like skinning your knee on an asphalt road, or it was like curling up in a sandpaper blanket. What was aggravating could only be fully communicated when it was actually felt.

If, in the words of Julian Jaynes, “language and its referents climbed up from the concrete to the abstract on the steps of metaphors, even . . . created the abstract on the bases of metaphors,” then autistics appear to reflect how knowledge is perpetually borne out of the sensing body and neurotypicals, how it is perpetually freed from it. Nothing at its root lacks flesh. The word “bad” can apparently be traced back to the Old English word for hermaphrodite, baeddel. To have a bad day, according to this (offensive) logic, would be to give birth to a child who is neither male nor female. Abstract words, writes Jaynes, are merely “ancient coins whose concrete images in the busy give-and-take of talk have worn away with use.” Whereas literate neurotypicals fill their pockets with such coins, autistics seem to crave freshly minted currency. Thus, for them, reported difficulty understanding metaphor may be less a function of sensory association than self-consciously mining the association for its cognitive implications. Indeed, studies from 2012, 2013, and 2014 have shown that autistic children can be taught the cognitive aspects of metaphor.

In my creative-writing courses at Grinnell, I’m consistently presented with a paradox: very bright students who can’t seem to use language concretely
and who haven’t a clue how to devise fresh analogies. “Pick nouns that you can see, hear, taste, or touch,” I say. “If you’re going to modify these nouns, choose unexpected modifiers. With metaphor, don’t think categorically; think perceptually. Look for resemblances that hide beneath what the dictionary insists makes objects distinctive. For example, *The streetlights, those dimming dominoes.* . . . Ignore the fact that the latter don’t illuminate anything or that the former never fall (except in a storm or earthquake), and instead focus on their shared, precategorical properties—in this case, verticality and roughly comparable sequentiality.” Sometimes, when I’m frustrated, when I’m ready to pull out whatever’s left of my diminished hair, I quote Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things.” And sometimes I tell my students a story.

A researcher once tested an autistic child on object recognition. When shown a picture of a decorative bedroom pillow with gold-colored welt cord and asked to identify what was in the picture, the boy said, “Ravioli.” Now, this is not a consciously deployed metaphor, in which a visual similarity serves a larger cognitive and emotional purpose, but it’s taken the first big step. I can well imagine a poem in which the speaker—namely, me!—remembers his Italian grandmother’s Bronx apartment: in particular, her cooking and her bed. I used to sleep in that bed with just such a pillow whenever I visited her, and she always treated me to my favorite dish: ravioli and meatballs. A metaphor, we might say, is cooking in the memory pot. The first line of the imagined poem might go like this: *Even her bed was a meal you could savor.* That in English “pasta” and “pillow” both begin with “p” could well be enough to send the poem on its musical and semantic way.

Melville was a genius at this kind of analogy. In the novel’s penultimate chapter, for instance, after the white whale has destroyed two of the harpooners’ boats, Ishmael reports, “For a space, the odorous cedar chips of the wrecks danced round and round, like the grated nutmeg in a swiftly stirred bowl of punch” (488). How, the reader might ask, can such a disaster be compared to a festive drink? One almost wants to side with the nineteenth-century reviewer who fulminated against Melville’s “implausible associations,” claiming that he “allowed his mind to run riot amid remote analogies.” But when you remember that Ishmael is telling his story of survival after the fact, you can begin to fathom how an image of fragrant, swirling punch might trigger a memory of the disaster and his deceased comrades. Trauma, too, heightens the sensory, unmooring it from frontal-lobe control and giving it a terrifying life of its own.
Exploring the neuroscience of autism and literary reading and writing, I began to think that literature might serve as a corrective—maybe even a kind of accommodation—for both autistics and neurotypicals. With the former, sensation overpowers thought; with the latter, thought overpowers sensation. Literature, of course, combines the two, as in this passage where Ishmael presents Ahab’s festering resentment of the white whale as something utterly tangible: “His steady, ivory stride was heard, as to and fro he paced his old rounds, upon planks so familiar to his tread, that they were all over dented, like geological stones, with the peculiar mark of his walk. Did you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger foot-prints—the foot-prints of his one unsleeping, ever-pacing thought” (136). Ahab’s manic brooding grows legs; it “turn[s] in him as he turned, and pace[s] in him as he paced”—to the extent that “all but seemed the inward mould of every outer movement” (136).

This perfect alignment of thought and action reflects how literature works in the extreme. Ideas without embodiment are preposterous. It’s almost as if Melville provided an allegory for the generation of mental imagery: just as Ahab’s ruminations palpably appear on the strange projection screen of his brow, so the image of Ahab palpably appears on the strange projection screen of our minds. A megalomaniacal ship captain, who is really nothing more than some graphic marks on a page, suddenly begins to move. In his novel *Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov comments, “We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. . . . I wish you to gasp not only at what you read but at the miracle of its being readable.” He’s right, but the miracle is less the regular conversion of water into wine than the taste and smell of that wine in our heads.

Yet sensory knowing in autism doesn’t end with a preference for language that elicits mental imagery; it extends to the medium of communication itself—what Alberto Manguel calls, from the point of view of a child learning to read, “that string of confused, alien ciphers.” The aforementioned study involving high- and low-imagery sentences is thought to corroborate a study from 2005, which found that autistics possess a “non-verbal, visually oriented processing style” and tend to remember printed letters as though they were shapes and not the phonological symbols that nonautistics immediately take them to be. The control group “coded each stimulus letter verbally to facilitate memory,” whereas the autistic group left them unnamed, showing less ac-
tivation in left-hemispheric prefrontal regions associated with language and more activation in the right hemisphere generally and in posterior regions.

This evidence led researchers to postulate a “greater reliance on visual feature analysis” when processing printed language. From the point of view of most experts, there is too much seeing in autistic reading, just as there is too much hearing in autistic listening to speech: the medium of communication refuses to disappear. The graphic or sonic properties of the words direct attention away from their ordinary function as signifiers. As a result, language behaves less like a mule than a rearing circus horse: something to behold as much as to unpack (or decode).

As a young boy, Tito treated words strictly as an “auditory toy.” When Soma recited poems to him, he would invent his own rhymes and acoustical patterns. “Designs can be visual,” he has said, “and designs can be formed in sound.” The pattern makes it “more than a thing to ignore.” Although he obviously learned how to use language semantically, he still thinks of literature as “an ambition to please the ear.” He has even compared saying a poem over and over again in his head to “self-stimulating action”: that state when an autist seems utterly consumed, at times even cornered, by his senses. Through trancelike repetition, the words lose their meaning and become mere marbles in the mouth.

A study from 2008 found that autistics exhibit “superior perceptual processing of speech relative to controls.” In other words, they actually hear speech sounds more precisely and robustly than neurotypicals, but they do not as effectively convert those sounds into usable phonemes. A phoneme, of course, is “any of the distinct units of sound in a specified language that distinguish one word from another.” With respect to neurotypicals, the study speculated that attention to meaning degrades perceptual awareness. As soon as the “p” in “purple” becomes a phoneme, it no longer sounds like the rain on your roof. Indeed, its wetness in the ear evaporates. The instrumental use of language depends, in part, on ignoring the sensuous materiality of the signifiers.

It also depends on effacing difference. As Reuven Tsur notes, unlike the processing of environmental sounds, “where the shape of the perceived sound is similar to the shape of the sound wave,” the processing of speech sounds requires active distortion. “We hear a unitary phoneme that is very different,” he says, “from the stream of auditory information that conveys it.” We learn to generalize, to produce an abstract and thoroughly homogenized phonetic category, one capable of working across all manner of voices and words. In
the process, “precategorical auditory information” is lost. To the neurotypical ear, the “p” of “purple” resembles the “p” of “popcorn” or the “p” of “potato.” While the words may be different as a result of the letters that follow, the “p” functions in the domain of sound the way common nouns function in the domain of sense. Once again, the prow of our frontal lobes haughtily parts the waters of particularity.

In contrast to the generalizing talent of neurotypicals, the “enhanced discrimination skills” of autistics make “extracting the common, invariant features characterizing all exemplars of a given phoneme” difficult. They simply hear too much specificity. The “p” of “purple” is not the “p” of “popcorn”; moreover, a Southern man’s “p” is different from a Southern woman’s “p.” In fact, each of a hundred Southern women’s “p”s is different from all of the others’ “p”s! In addition, autistics do not appear to have a “primary, or ‘default,’ speech-processing mode.” Unlike neurotypicals, they neither automatically listen for meaning when in the presence of speech sounds nor automatically privilege such sounds over all other sounds in the environment. To an autistic child, the wind in the birch trees is just as compelling as a friend’s comment on the playground.

All of these things render oral comprehension a Herculean task for many autistics. “I doubt whether the typical person’s talking voice and my listening ears cooperate,” Tito remarks, “because those ears are also scooping up noises with their remote spatula-shaped lobes—not just from the talking voice but also from the sound of my own breathing, the humming of the refrigerator, and perhaps even the scratching of my hands around my cheek as I anticipate other noises in the environment, like a spoon dropping somewhere to stir a new vibration of sound in the air.” Whereas neurotypicals can easily block out such auditory information, autistics cannot. “My ears are like sinking, overloaded boats,” Tito says in a nod to Moby-Dick. “There is simply too much to scoop up and pour into my ears.” Of course, the issue of attention works both ways. As the authors of another study comment, the “reduction of the surrounding environment” in neurotypical attention is “a great simplification, if one . . . consider[s] the richness of what is constantly available for an agent to see, hear and otherwise experience.” Such richness gets overlooked when people strictly pathologize autism.

A passage from Tito’s second memoir, How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move?, nicely captures the tension between autistic richness and impairment. In it, he recalls trying to prove his competence to a researcher who doubted that the “severely” autistic can master language. Instructed to listen
to a book being read aloud by an aide and to report on what it says, Tito found himself focusing on the man’s voice, not on the meaning of his words:

Claude read. . . . I saw the voice transform into long apple green and yellow strings, searching under the table for who knows what? Threads like raw silk forming from Claude’s voice.

Claude read. I watched those strings vibrate with different amplitudes as Claude tried to impress the silent beholders and serious researchers of autism with the varying tones of a near-to-perfection performance.

Claude read. I watched those strings with stresses and strains, reaching their own elastic limits and snapping every now and then, when his voice reached a certain pitch. I saw those snapped strings form knots like entangled silk, the color of apple green and yellow.

When the researcher asked, “So, what was he reading?” Tito responded with a sentence about “the beauty of the color green, when yellow sunshine melts its way through newly grown leaves.” (“Take that, Mr. Bigwig!” I want to shout from the bleachers of my reading—I’ve had my own encounters with arrogant autism professionals.)

Like his nose at Arrowhead, Tito’s ears wouldn’t settle for a conventional relationship to language. His synesthesia, which neuroimaging has documented, suggests a complete immersion in the sensory and a further loosening of categorical bonds: as hearing becomes sight, sound becomes silk. The researcher, of course, interpreted the answer as a failure to comprehend what was read—not as a lucid and indeed artful description of the voice’s alternative registration. (This god of science, let us say, is hardheaded and hard-nosed, sensible without being sensitive. He has banished irony from the lab!) Tito has had to teach himself not to respond to spoken language in this fashion, but when emotions run high—aft er all, his very personhood was at stake—ordinary understanding proves challenging.

“But why praise sensory richness?” some would ask. “People with autism need jobs. They need to be able to care for themselves. They need to be able to understand what’s being said to them.” Diane Sawyer, the former host of Good Morning America, once dismissed the concept of neurodiversity as “a beautiful way of justifying heartbreak.” She was interviewing Ari Ne’eman, cofounder of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN). No one with any judgment would minimize the hardships of autism, yet, as a literature professor and writer, I see strength in the condition’s sensory orientation. (At faculty meetings, when my colleagues drone on and on, I positively pine
for an apple green and yellow distraction!) As a human being, I marvel at autistics joie de vivre—call it neurological carpe diem. Robert Frost once wrote, “The present / Is too much for the senses, / Too crowded, too confusing.” But if the present is where we live, we neurotypicals should ask ourselves, “How much life are we missing?”

After reading the “Mast-head” chapter, Tito sent me a poem—he would often send poems or mini-essays along with his notes for our weekly discussions—in which he cleverly deployed Ishmael’s failure to look for whales on the mast-head of the Pequod as a metaphor for his own failure to listen for meaning on the mast-head of speech. Ishmael, as readers of Moby-Dick know, was a terrible mast-head watchman:

Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I—being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude,—how could I but lightly hold my obligations to observe all whale-ships’ standing orders, “Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time.” . . . I say: your whales must be seen before they can be killed. (153)

On the mast-head “the young philosopher,” as our narrator humorously refers to himself, is “ lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie . . . by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that . . . he loses his identity” (154). Indeed, he forgets his job as watchman, forgets even the concept of whale or water or mast-head. When this occurs, Ishmael says, “there is no life in him . . . except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship, by her borrowed from the sea” (155).

For Tito, a better description of how autistics lose themselves in the sensory doesn’t exist. While the sensory frequently exasperates, it just as frequently enchants, and it can have a “drug-like addictive effect,” according to Donna Williams. For her this sort of pleasure resembles “merging with God because [she] would resonate with the sensory nature of [an] object with such an absolute purity and loss of self that . . . [she would] become part of the beauty itself.” Literary critics have traditionally understood the “Mast-head” chapter—really the novel as a whole—as expressing Melville’s own search for God, and there’s more than a hint that a deliberate, frontal-lobe assault won’t find her.

The poem’s occasion, Tito explained, was an ordinary conversation. Up with the seagulls and the wind, clinging to that spar we call a human voice,
he once again struggled to make phonemes, but something mysterious and ennobling, he suggests, is at least the equal of semantic comprehension.

_I Kept but Sorry Guard_

There must have been shoals of them in the far horizon.

—HERMAN MELVILLE

His voice was a mere frequency of sound.
Like any other voice, it carried a wave in sound.
I saw the wave come bouncing around.

There might have been words moving along that wave,
Moving past me, sailing down that wave,
Lingering a little before they escaped.

The voice before me—its frequency was blue.
Light as the light, the spreading of that blue.
Lulled into listlessness, I was lulled into blue.

He asked me questions—maybe one or two—
As I manned the mast-head but failed to pursue
Those shoals of meaning in a faraway blue.

Is there a better way to describe the two competing forms of attention? Whereas autistics “keep sorry guard” over meaning, neurotypicals “keep sorry guard” over precategorical sensation. In literary writing, especially poetry, we’re hunting two kinds of whales—or, rather, one hybrid one.

In life, of course, we’re ruthlessly utilitarian. “What is my contribution to society?” Tito asks in _How Can I Talk If My Lips Don’t Move?_ “With my physical and neurological limitations, I am unable to do certain kinds of work. But I can think,” he says. “And I can write. I can write down my stories on paper with my pencil.” But then his words turn darker as he ponders “the humiliation he will face” when his mother is gone and “[he is] at the mercy of others”:

Perhaps my mere presence will be a contribution because it will remind some stray hearts that they have enough reasons to be thankful to the Maker of the Universe because they are not like me. And by my mere presence . . . I can remind the Creator . . . that all that He has created may not be perfect . . . and forgive [Him] for every distortion in which I exist. And I am not worried about Hell because I have experienced it here on earth.
At the end of the “Mast-head” chapter, Ishmael jokes that the problem with “the young philosophers” is that “their vision is imperfect” (154). “They are short-sighted; what use, then, to strain the visual nerve? They have left their opera glasses at home” (154). Of course, the penchant for precategorical sensory information in autism is itself a kind of near-sightedness. Finger-ting visual impairment as the cause of poor job performance, Melville slyly satirizes a narrow economic sense of value. What good is a mast-head watchman who can’t spot whales or a writer who can’t sell books or an autistic person who can’t always decipher speech? Who needs esoteric wonders? Like a foghorn on the coast, life intones its constant warning: “You must make money!” In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville once complained, “Dollars damn me. . . . Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies.” At the age of ten, my son, who was nearly killed by his birth mother and then horrifically abused in foster care, typed on his computer, “Autism sucks, Dad, but I see things that you don’t see.”

we arrived at Mystic Seaport, I immediately spotted the Morgan’s masts. As we waited for our guide near the entrance, the ship’s grandeur unabashedly declared itself. Whatever equivalence existed between actual sight and the vision afforded by literature, the orbs that flanked my nose behaved like Oliver Twist: “May I have some more, sir?” they cried after a first helping of the visual. Perhaps seeing anything out of the ordinary allows neurotypicals to at least partially cast off the yoke of the categorical and return to the sensory.

Built in 1841, the Morgan, we learned, is roughly 107 feet long, twenty-seven feet wide, and fourteen feet deep. Its main mast, on which the young philosopher stood precariously perched, rises 110 feet above the deck. During our tour, some interns demonstrated climbing up to the mast-head—they looked like gulls circling a church spire. In its time, the ship boasted seven thousand square feet of sail, and it carried a crew of between thirty and thirty-six men and four whaleboats. Because the ship was so slow, smaller craft were lowered for the chase and kill. The large try-works, the brick furnace used for turning blubber into oil, sits toward the bow. The Morgan’s first voyage yielded fifty-one whales—about 850 barrels of oil. Eighty years later, at the conclusion of its thirty-seventh and final commercial voyage, it had processed 55,000 barrels of whale oil and 153,000 pounds of whalebone.
Before we toured the ship, Mary K. showed us one of the whaling boats, which lay in the water, its oars on the dock. I was surprised by how big the boat was and yet how little room there must have been with one man operating the long steering oar, several men paddling furiously, and at least one harpooner at the ready with his iron spear. With so many moving men and parts, the chances of getting caught in the whale line or being yanked from the boat and lost were high. “When the line is darting out, to be seated . . . in the boat,” Ishmael reports, “is like being seated in the midst of the manifold whizzings of a steam engine in full play, when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you” (253).

If reading *Moby-Dick* with Tito had done anything, it had made me think less about the fate of the whaleman, however, and more about the fate of the whale. In preparing for our trip, I had found on the New Bedford Whaling Museum website an account of the marine mammal’s typical slaughter:

When the whale tired, the crew pulled on the line to draw the boat close to their prey, while . . . the boatheader carried a lance forward and plunged it into a vulnerable spot, such as the heart or lungs. With each breath, the whale spouted blood. . . . As the whaleboat backed off again, the crew observed the awesome spectacle of the death of the whale. The great beast swam violently in ever smaller circles, a pattern known as the “flurry.” The end came when the whale beat the water with its tail, shuddered and . . . turned over on its side.

In *Moby-Dick* the moment of the kill is even more dramatically—and analogically—rendered: “The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake” (256–57).

Ishmael depicts a truly hellish enterprise, one whose cruelty is unmistakable: “Stubb slowly churned his long sharp lance into the fish, and kept it there, carefully churning and churning, as if cautiously seeking to feel after some gold watch that the whale might have swallowed. . . . But that gold watch he sought was the innermost life of the fish” (257). After Stubb’s assault, the whale, Ishmael tells us, “surg[ed] from side to side; spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations. At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore, as if it had been the purple lees of red wine, shot into the frightened air. . . . His heart had burst!” (257).

Because Tito identified with the creature whose liquid life seemed analogous to his own sensory one, he, too, felt hunted. Encountering Ahab, he
compared the captain’s obsession with killing Moby Dick to our culture’s obsession with vanquishing autism. Just as Ahab believes that the white whale maliciously took his leg, so people believe that autism maliciously takes their children. Of his phantom antagonist, Ahab says, “I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate” (159). Like Moby Dick, the classically autistic represent a lamentable enigma. Try as you might, you cannot crack the mystery of their strange behavior. You cannot penetrate their wordless gaze—or so the stereotype contends. At the very end of the novel, just before delivering to Moby Dick what he hopes is a fatal blow, Ahab screams, “To the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (499).

Tito’s conceit may seem hyperbolic until you consider the kind of fundraising advertisements that Autism Speaks supports. “I am autism,” a particularly infamous one declares. “I am visible in your children, but if I can help it, I am invisible to you until it’s too late. . . . I work faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined.” Becoming louder and more demonic, the voice in the ad sneers, “If you’re happily married, I will make sure your marriage fails. Your money will fall into my hands, and I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain.” With glee, it then alludes to the plight of underfunded researchers, the heroes in this implied drama of good and evil: “Your scientists don’t have the resources, and I relish their desperation.”

As Tito well knew, ferociously negative depictions of autism have consequences. Like a kind of awful clockwork, the news regularly coughed up stories of parents murdering their autistic children. In 2015 alone, seventy autistics died at the hands of family members. Just this morning, a wealthy, New York businesswoman was convicted of manslaughter in the death of her six-year-old, nonspeaking son. After trying all manner of quack treatments and still not finding a cure, she forcibly fed the boy a lethal concoction of painkillers and anti-inflammatories. To be certain that he consumed this concoction, she stuck a syringe— I want to say a harpoon—down his throat. And not three days ago, a woman in Oregon parked her car on a bridge and threw her six-year-old, nonspeaking son into the waters of Yaquina Bay. When I try to picture this boy—the wind on his face, that orange spider perched in the sky, his mother yanking him toward the rail—I shudder at how perilous the mast-head of autism really is. “And . . . with one half-throttled shriek,” Ishmael says, “you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever” (155).
Even scientists, no matter how dispassionate their work, play into a narrative of relentless pathology. “You have calculated the intelligence of an autistic person,” Tito wrote in one of his essays. “You have measured his skull and found it bigger than others, you have measured the white matter over grey matter, you have measured his emotions, but could you please help me to calculate the number of steps to the moon?” He would rather live on that desolate, rotating orb than perpetually engage with the medical and education establishments, to say nothing of the autism alarmists. In a satire of the rising incidence rate of autism, he teased, “Beware! Beware! One out of eighty-eight! Or eighty-eight out of something, or something out of eighty-eight, or perhaps I am getting confused because eighty-eight looks like two giant infinities: heads down, bodies up—they have no legs to run.”

“Is Ishmael complicit in the whale slaughter?” I asked during one of our Skype sessions. We had both been uneasy about his macabre accounts of dismemberment, as he almost seemed to delight in the great mammal’s demise. At one point in the novel, the crew takes apart a sperm whale and then, a couple of days later, a right whale. Severed from their bodies, the gargantuan heads of these creatures hang from the two sides of the ship. “As before,” Ishmael recalls, “the Pequod steeply leaned over toward the sperm whale’s head, now, by counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even-keel; though sorely strained” (295). One head he mischievously calls the philosopher John Locke; the other, Immanuel Kant. “Here, now, are two great whales, laying their heads together,” he says, “let us join them and lay together our own” (297).

In the end, we decided that Ishmael is a bit like an environmentalist who works at Exxon. A whaling vessel is no place for a cetacean advocate, but that’s where Ishmael found himself. Tito and I took note of how he compares the anatomical features of humans and whales and mounts an argument in support of the latter’s physiology. “The position of the whale’s eyes corresponds to that of a man’s ears,” he says, “and you may fancy for yourself, how it would fare with you, did you sideways survey objects through your ears” (297). While such vision most certainly has its drawbacks—among other things, a considerable gap at the center of the visual field—it also has its advantages. By working in monocular fashion, each eye retains its autonomy. As a result, the whale’s brain, according to Ishmael, “can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction” (298). Imagine a man, he boasts, “simultaneously go[ing] through the demonstrations of two distinct problems in Euclid” (298).
Ishmael also celebrates the virtues of the whale’s ear and, pointing out how “wondrously minute” it is, comments,

Is it not curious, that so vast a being as the whale should see the world through so small an eye, and hear the thunder through an ear which is smaller than a hare’s? But if his eyes were broad as the lens of Herschel’s great telescope; and his ears capacious as the porches of cathedrals; would that make him any longer of sight, or sharper of hearing? Not at all. Why then do you try to “enlarge” your mind? Subtilize it. (299)

In this way, it required no effort at all to link Ishmael’s defense of the whale with neurodiversity’s defense of autism.

Tito especially appreciated Ishmael’s understanding of the whale’s lack of speech: “Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say to this world, unless forced to stammer out something by way of getting a living” (332). Ahab, in contrast, rails against the creature’s silence. In the aforementioned scene with the severed heads, he approaches the sperm whale and issues a command: “Speak thou vast and venerable head . . .; speak . . . and tell us the secret thing that is in thee” (282). The whale, of course, cannot speak; moreover, it is dead. The absurdity of Ahab’s wish points to his fundamental narcissism: he wants the animal to conform to his own physiology, indeed his own cognition. Any departure is maddening defect. Approaching the sperm whale once again, he cries in frustration, “O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets . . . and not one syllable is thine!” (282).

Precisely because speech is considered the quintessential mark of the human, Tito has despaired of his inability to speak. “Did you ever wonder how so much sound can hide in the inch and a half of a typical person’s mouth?” he asks. “I guess you notice things like this when your own mouth contains but a few limited sounds.” In a poem titled “Harpoons,” he mapped the slaughter of whales onto a typical scene with a “severely” autistic child, ghoulishly suggesting that violent death might be a form of speech therapy:

Harpoons

With harpoons they queried—they lacked finesse.
He voiced no response except some noisy breaths,
Excavating sound from deep in his chest.
What pointed questions! They injured his head!  
He breathed to explain how he talks with that head:  
Great blubbery words that rise from his chest.  

Is there a mind, they wondered, inside that head?  
The sound of his answers? Those cumbersome breaths.  
Let blood uproot what’s locked in his chest.

Imagining a time when both whales and autism have vanished, he wrote in a prose piece, “Your voice is an extinct animal—too primordial and fossilized. All you will hear from that fossil are a few gurgles, fathoms deep, beneath the rolling waves.”

“Are we imposing autism on the novel?” I asked some thirteen months into our discussions. “No,” Tito replied. “It is the hidden image that lurks in the sea. Sometimes it shows up as Ahab’s mania and obsession; sometimes it shows up in the way Ishmael sees the world from the mast-head; and sometimes it shows up in Moby Dick himself.” In at least one respect, my question was unfair. After all, readers make sense of a book in relation to their own experiences. As important, Tito insisted that autism itself exists in the novel: in the figure of the carpenter, who fashions a second prosthetic leg for Ahab when the original prosthesis fails. Admittedly, it is something of a cottage industry identifying literary and historical figures that may have been autistic, yet Tito is definitely onto something.

The carpenter, Ishmael says, was as “uncompromised as a new-born babe; living without premeditated reference to this world or the next” (409). “You might almost say,” Ishmael continues, “that this strange uncompromisedness in him involved a sort of unintelligence; for his numerous trades, he did not seem to work so much by reason or instinct, or simply because he had been tutored to it, or by any intermixing of all of these, . . . but merely by a kind of deaf and dumb, spontaneous literal process” (409). The carpenter was a “pure manipulator; his brain . . . must have early oozed along into the muscles of his fingers” (409). The portrait is indeed highly suggestive of one form of autism—the “intelligence,” in the words of Leo Kanner, “scarcely touched by tradition and culture”; the inexplicable and automatic technical abilities; the infamously one-sided conversations. Whatever was different about the carpenter, Ishmael notes, it “kept him a great part of the time soliloquizing; but only like an unreasoning wheel, which also hummingly soliloquizes; or, rather, his body was a sentry-box and this soliloquizer on guard there” (410).
As an author, Melville witnessed the rise of professional medicine. By 1851, the date of the novel’s publication, however, what we think of as psychiatric disorders hadn’t even begun to congeal into something like official diagnoses. In fact, it would take another ninety years before the term “autism” would come into existence. In many ways, the world of 1850 was much more neurodiverse than our own, particularly on whaling vessels, which tended to collect those who didn’t fit into ordinary society. Diagnosing the carpenter with “high-functioning” autism, Tito took pleasure in his gainful employment and extraordinary craftsmanship, while also mourning his own lack of possibilities.

But if he wasn’t imposing autism on the novel, surely Tito was responding to it autistically, perseverating on it, perhaps even turning it into a cognitive version of stimming. After all, most of the writing by him that I’ve presented in this chapter has some connection to it. Yet we were reading the novel slowly, as if under a microscope, which paradoxically allowed it to expand—beyond, much beyond, its already appreciable heft. Suddenly, all manner of things became visible: from clever historical references to subtle thematic patterns. I came to believe that every great novel should be encountered this way. As Tito said toward the end of our adventure, “We will let it swim back and forth for a few more weeks, discussing two chapters at a time because slow cooking brings out the best of the whale flavor.” What literature professors call “close reading” might as well be called “autistic reading,” I decided, for the kind of careful attention and full-bodied engagement that Tito evinced are exactly what literature deserves.

Even more than what such reading did for our understanding of Moby-Dick, the story did something for—or, rather, to—our lives. Moby-Dick was everywhere; we couldn’t escape it. “For nearly seventeen months, I navigated the novel with my teacher and captain, Ralph Savarese,” Tito wrote:

Sitting in my room, I saw Moby Dick through the eyes of Jonah in Father Mapple’s sermon—my room the hollow stomach of the whale. Flapping my hands, I saw whale flippers. No wonder it took me a long time to isolate my fingers and learn to write with a pencil! Looking at the Walmart parking lot, I saw a concrete sea. The abandoned trolleys were boats waiting for the wind to knock them against someone’s car—and I, I was a cautious whale swimming toward the front door. I saw Moby Dick trapped in a wall clock, the Pequod pursuing it. And I saw time as a slippery fish chasing its own future. Working through
the pages of *Moby-Dick*, I spotted Ahab’s frown in the folds of billowing clouds just before it started to rain; I heard Starbuck’s whispers in a hotel air-conditioner; and I recognized Stubb’s laughter in my own voice when my very existence seemed absurd. One day, there was Moby Dick in the sickle moon; around it blue-green clouds. Another day there was Moby Dick in an airplane—we were the passengers stepping inside.

As Ahab ruled the *Pequod*, so Melville’s novel ruled Tito’s ship of days.

I, too, saw *Moby-Dick* everywhere. Whatever else I was reading I read in relation to that mysterious tome. I was like the mad captain at the end of the novel: I’d gotten my harpoon into Moby Dick but was “taken out of the boat by the line” (253) and “dragged down after him into the profundity of the sea” (252). Waxing existential, Ishmael says, “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks. . . . And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side” (253). And if you be a reader of *Moby-Dick*, well, grab hold of that poker, for the “most dreaded creatures glide” beneath your easy chair, “treacherously hidden” by “the loveliest tints of azure” (248).

“There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away,” Emily Dickinson once opined, but it can just as easily transmogrify your house. In a letter to the New York publisher Evert Duyckinck, composed while writing *Moby-Dick* at Arrowhead, Melville commented,

I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic. My room seems a ship’s cabin; & at nights when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney.

I’d put the wind in Iowa up against the wind in western Massachusetts any day—it’s not for nothing that the wagons making their slow way across the Midwest were called prairie schooners! Many a night before my own evening fire or tossing in bed, I’d want to rig in the chimney myself. And from that slippery perch, I’d look up suddenly, finding an even bigger theater for my imagination. “Nor when expandingly lifted by your subject, can you fail
to trace out great whales in the starry heavens, and boats in pursuit of them” (2.45), Ishmael says.

...  

After giving us a thorough tour of the Morgan’s deck, Mary K. took Tito, Soma, and me below and showed us the captain’s stateroom and the crew’s very cramped quarters. It was hard to believe how tiny the sleeping berths were and how little privacy they offered. Climbing into one of the berths, I thought of how Ishmael characterizes the sailor’s sleep: “under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales” (74). Another set of stairs and we were in the very bowels of the ship—where the crew kept its supplies and barrels of whale oil. When we had finished with the Morgan, Mary K. showed us the Charles Mallory Sail Loft, where the sails for the Morgan and other ships were repaired. We also visited the Cooperage and the James Driggs Shipsmith shop, in whose working forge harpoons were made. Mary K. invited Tito to work the giant, suspended bellows that fanned the fire. I have a wonderful picture of him doing so.

Leaving Mystic Seaport, we felt the way that we felt at the end of our readerly voyage. We had lived with this story, these characters, for nearly a year and a half. “It’s sad to see them go,” Tito said.

“We could read Moby-Dick again,” I joked.

“How about another book?”

“Yes, another book,” I replied.

When I returned to Iowa and opened my email, I saw that a whale or perhaps a mast-head watchman had left me a message: “We are home. And I am eager. Are we meeting this evening?”