In the penultimate stanza of John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the speaker of the poem addresses a priest who is depicted in one of the urn’s scenes:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

Not until I was conversing with Temple Grandin for the first time and she recalled reading the poem in college did I pay any attention to that heifer. But there, as the ode moves toward its ambiguous conclusion—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”—is indeed a cow, a decorated one whose slaughter is ceremonially enacted.

Sometimes encountering a familiar literary work, you are shocked to discover what it contains. It’s a bit like pulling a tie out of your cereal box, draping it around your neck, and going to work. I couldn’t believe that I was talking to the grand dame of autism and livestock handling about the British Romantic poet John Keats! And that she had brought him up! This is uncanny, I
thought to myself, an immediate link between literature and cattle. As I sat in my hotel room in Bochum, Germany—I was there for a conference—the words of Alice Walker came to mind: “Expect nothing. Live frugally / on surprise.”

To be clear, I was the one who noticed the heifer, having looked up the poem on my computer as we spoke. This wasn’t a case of autistic perseveration, where the person can only talk about her “restricted interests” or can only like something if it is somehow related to them. No, Temple remembered her professor’s enthusiasm for the theme: the relation of immutable art to mutable life. A beautifully painted burial urn can offer solace in the face of death, the poet tells us, but it remains frustratingly aloof from the ravages of time. The eternity it advertises is frozen, out of reach—like the sky for wingless creatures.

It’s a good thing we didn’t talk about the heifer, I later realized, because the depiction is inaccurate. As Thomas Bayne remarked in 1905, citing other critics, “The poet . . . makes the animal raise its head unnaturally high, and thereby destroys the effect of his picture.” Bayne called Keats “a townsman unfamiliar with the ways of cattle.” I had read that Temple had been especially worried about the details of the livestock handling equipment and breed of cattle in the HBO film about her life: “We can’t have a silly thing like that City Slickers movie, where they had Holstein cattle out there,” she said. “If you know anything about cattle, you’d know that was stupid.”

A few months before this extended conversation with Temple, the first of two that I would have, I had written to her assistant, a very nice woman named Cheryl Miller, about the possibility of reading some short stories by Skype. Right from the beginning, I had sought to “control” for Temple’s well-known sequencing difficulties (I talk about them in the introduction) by purposefully choosing shorter works whose plots weren’t especially complicated. I also suspected that she wouldn’t be able to devote months and months to weekly discussions of a novel. I wanted to give myself the best shot at her participation and to give her the best shot at showing what she could do.

I decided to include Temple in this book because, on the face of it, she seemed the last person with autism to be receptive to literature. Oliver Sacks had made that clear in his New Yorker profile of her, “An Anthropologist on Mars,” and she herself had contributed to the image of an obdurately rational alien who is stumped by social nuance and feeling. In the book that made her famous, Thinking in Pictures, she had said, “My emotions are simpler
than those of most people. . . . I only understand . . . fear, anger, happiness, and sadness.” She “relate[d] better,” she claimed, “to scientists and engineers” because her thinking, like theirs, at least professionally, “was governed by logic instead of emotion.” On the Web she is reported to have said, “The part of other people that has emotional relationships is not part of me.”

Can literature be strictly logical? Can narrative conflict exist without complicated human relationships? Feeling, of course, is the colorful playground of stories and poems. We climb on feelings, swing from them, and through a writer’s artistry, we become immediate acrobats, responsive Olympians. Even if Temple could fathom a short story intellectually, she likely couldn’t feel it, the conventional wisdom held, and if she couldn’t feel it, she couldn’t truly appreciate it. But was this reasoning correct, and did it actually matter? Why pooh-pooh intellectual understanding when, as a teacher of literature, I ask my students to analyze the texts I give them? I want them to love literature, but I expect that love, that pleasure, to be disciplined by sophisticated understanding.

I knew that when most Americans thought of autism, they thought of Temple, and my argument would invariably be measured against what she has said about the condition. It almost didn’t matter that she was increasingly emphasizing variation in autism or that my other collaborators in this book are so plainly different from her and from each other. It didn’t matter that Temple often contradicts herself, especially with respect to emotional understanding. The stereotype prevails; that’s what stereotypes do. To use a political metaphor, if my readers were the president of the United States, then Temple was their chief of staff: to get to them, I’d have to go through her first.

I also wanted a crack—the ultimate one—at proving the conventional wisdom wrong. It had not only been useless with respect to my son but also damaging. In my darkest moments, I tend to think of the narrow medical view of autism in the way Victor Hugo thought of small-town life: “There are many mouths that talk, and very few heads which think.” And, anyway, I wasn’t the least bit scared of a reader who fails to “swoon” in the face of literature. (Eugenie, from the previous chapter, might level that charge at brainy old me.) Put simply, I was used to people protesting, “I’m bored by literature. It does nothing for me.” That, after all, is what students are for! Each semester some of them sit in the back of the class and proclaim, with their yawning, “I’d rather be having lunch!” My job as a teacher, to borrow Temple’s own words from one of our conversations, is “to make it interesting.” Maybe I could do that with her.
But there was another important reason for including Temple in the book. Any logic-emotion dichotomy that places engineers, scientists, and autistics on one side of the cognitive canyon and artists and musicians on the other, with nary a bridge to join them, is just too rigid to be true. Moreover, it belies the conspicuously poetic way she thinks. However logical its final form, thought for Temple begins as a game of visual free association. As she says in a video on her website, “My brain is visually indexed. . . . Everything in my mind works like a search engine set to the image function. You type in a key word and I get pictures. And it comes up in an associational sort of way.” For example, “If I think about Great Danes, the first memory that pops into my head is Dansk, the Great Dane owned by the headmaster at my school. The next Great Dane I visualize is Helga, who was Dansk’s replacement. The next is my aunt’s dog in Arizona, and my final image comes from an advertisement for Fitwell seat covers that featured that kind of dog.” It may be a stretch to compare this rather orderly flow of images to what happens in a poem or in a novel that employs stream of consciousness, but Temple makes clear how the process can go awry, which is to say, become creative.

Consider the following sentence from a Time magazine article about Olympic figure skating: “All of the elements are in place—the spotlights, the swelling waltzes and jazz tunes, the sequined sprites taking to the air.” “In my imagination,” Temple remarks, “I see the skating rink and skaters. However, if I ponder too long on the word ‘elements,’ I will make the inappropriate association of a periodic table on the wall of my high school chemistry classroom. Pausing on the word ‘sprite’ triggers an image of a Sprite can in my refrigerator instead of a pretty young skater.” Temple views this sort of associational proclivity as an impediment to learning. “Teachers who work with autistic children need to understand associative thought patterns,” she says rather dryly.

Yet in another context, the literature or creative-writing classroom, it’s a potential strength, and Temple could be taught to exploit it. When I open the fridge, a Sprite can does a double toe loop and falls on the floor. What a fizzy, sequined mess! Literature, I tell my students, visualizes inappropriately. At its most inappropriate, it veers toward surrealism. It also visualizes specifically, which is to say concretely. “My thinking pattern always starts with specifics and works toward generalization,” Temple tells us. She might have added that it never actually arrives at generalization. As she says of Great Danes, for her “there is no generalized, generic Great Dane.” Rather, she fashions something like a loose composite or amalgam of sensuous particulars.
It’s an affiliation strong enough to suggest relation but not so strong as to collapse into singular abstraction.

This is how literature works; its fidelity is to Dansk or to Helga, not to the concept of Great Dane. It’s about this dog with these markings. It provides a fully emergent account of life, not a top-down, preformulated one in which the particulars don’t matter because they get in the way of the idea. Literature’s vaunted universality comes precisely from our belief in the individual, idiosyncratic instance. It moves toward the general, we might say, while strangely eschewing it.

Here, too, an autistic proclivity can serve as an advantage—less so perhaps when the student is asked in a literature course to present a thesis (or generalization) about a work and to adduce specific examples to support it. (I say “perhaps” because I’ve seen autistic students shine at this task.) It’s a rare young person who can think equally well in both directions. My brightest neurotypical students often struggle in creative-writing courses until they decide, like Odysseus, to lash themselves to the mast of bottom-up specificity and thereby resist the siren call of abstraction. In contrast, my brightest autistic students often walk the deck entirely unaffected. “The truth of the story lies in the details,” says Paul Auster. “Tiny details, imperceptible to us, decide everything,” W. G. Sebald insists.

It’s a great irony that Temple now stands in for autism. This bottom-up, detail-driven visualizer has become—perversely—a generalization, a way of doing quick, top-down thinking about the “disorder.” She is no longer one of many Great Danes, as it were. If autism is a condition characterized by global underconnectivity and local overconnectivity, then there are myriad ways to be under- and overconnected. There might be too much, or too little, feeling, for instance. By having Temple come last in the book, I am trying to unsettle a pernicious habit. I am trying to be faithful to the process of thinking that she describes.

When I wrote to Cheryl, she said she would forward my email to Temple but warned me about how busy she was. Temple had blurbed my memoir Reasonable People and had mentioned my son, DJ, in one of her books, so I wasn’t a complete stranger to her. She also had a habit of accommodating the research requests of fellow academics. A professor of animal science at Colorado State University, she had cheerfully climbed into all manner of imaging machines to further the science of autism. In fact, she felt a duty to do so. Might she climb into a couple of short stories with me?
One night, awaiting her reply, I had a dream in which I sought to make an appointment with a doctor. The doctor, it became increasingly clear, was John Dolittle of Dr. Dolittle fame. His secretary kept saying, “I’m sorry. He doesn’t see human patients, and you don’t speak the language of animals.” I remember waking with a start: She’s not going to read fiction with me. But, then, a week later, an email popped up in my inbox:

Dear Ralph—

I would be happy to do an interview and I would prefer to talk by phone and you can record our conversation. I am constantly traveling and the regular phone is easier for me.

Temple

I was ecstatic.

In choosing which stories to send to Temple, I fell back on the principle that had guided me from the beginning: pick something of likely interest to my collaborator. Still under the sway of that Dolittle dream, I settled on two stories from a recent anthology, Among Animals: The Lives of Animals and Humans in Contemporary Short Fiction. In one, called “Meat,” a man is appalled by the horrors of commercial livestock production and decides to humanely raise and slaughter the animals that his family eats. In the other, called “The Ecstatic Cry,” a female biologist devotes her life to saving endangered penguins. In both stories, of course, complications arise. The family becomes attached to “Meat”—the name they give to their first pig in order to remind themselves of its fate. The biologist, who has grown to abhor her own species, longs in her Antarctic solitude for companionship and sex.

With the first story, I wanted to see if Temple would respond emotionally to material that in life sometimes reduced her to tears. In his New Yorker profile, Sacks reported that she “wept and wept” at the slaughter of pigs that were the basis of her doctoral dissertation. “I was very attached,” she told him. “I was so attached I couldn’t kill them.” In Thinking in Pictures, we learn that touching cattle as a teenager had awakened a sense of subjectivity: “I was able to remain the neutral scientist,” she wrote, “until I placed my hands on them at the Swift Plant and feedlots in 1974.”

Might a story about an animal activate the sort of affective processes that literary fiction activates generally in typical readers? Might it take what psychologists call the “emotionally avoidant” person, one who doesn’t read much literary fiction, by surprise? Does subject matter matter, in other
words, when it comes to assessing the readerly abilities of some people with autism? We saw that it mattered a great deal in the chapter on Dora, though not for the reasons many would imagine. I also wanted to see how Temple would respond to fiction as a mode of expression: its images, its ironies, its figures of speech—all of that marvelous indirection.

With the second story, I wanted to see if she would identify with the biologist and, further, if the story would elicit from her a reflection on her own life choices. This, after all, is one of the great pleasures of literature: the way it enables self-discovery and growth. Temple has been very public about her decision to be celibate, which she viewed as a natural response to difficulties comprehending emotion. Might the story encourage her to revisit this fundamental belief and, at the same time, offer practice in that other, crucial form of exploration: namely, coming to understand other people’s joys and sorrows?

Increasingly, research has demonstrated that reading literary (as opposed to popular) fiction can improve theory-of-mind (or mentalizing) abilities and empathy. In the words of Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, “Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction . . . can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for . . . social inference.” While the claim may sound to some like classic humanist—if you’ll forgive me—hogwash, we now have some hard evidence to support it. Literary fiction also provides an opportunity to better understand one’s own self. In short, it changes people, which, as Oatley and Maja Djikic, put it, “is impressive, given the stability of the personality system.”

In one study, reading literary fiction for just a few minutes resulted in temporarily enhanced emotional perception. In another, “individuals who were habitually avoidant in their attachment style, and who usually reported diminished emotionality,” felt more emotion when they read a story by Anton Chekhov than when they read a “version of the story in which nothing was changed but its formal artistic properties.” Might literary fiction, as the latter study’s authors maintain, “provide a method for circumventing a person’s natural defenses and . . . a useful tool for studying those with affective disorders (e.g., alexithymia)”?

I want to be careful with the appeal to bibliotherapy, as I don’t subscribe to the idea that autistic people are broken and need to be fixed. In the end, my aim with Temple was to do what literature does: complicate simple propositions, render them ambiguous—instructively so. We agreed to have two conversations by phone: one for each story. “Gratitude,” Joseph Stalin
infamously remarked, “is a sickness suffered by dogs.” While I would have preferred to have multiple conversations, I was all too happy to bark!

... 

When I called her from Germany, Temple was waiting to catch a flight back to Colorado Springs—she had just given one of her many professional talks. I began by asking about her experience reading literature, and I was surprised to discover her familiarity with the liberal arts. Somehow I had assumed that she possessed a strictly vocational education, what with her professional focus on livestock, but, no, she had graduated in 1970 from Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire with a bachelor of arts degree in psychology, and she had taken courses in history, French, philosophy, and English, among other disciplines.

One of those courses, “Western Civilization,” which she described as “classical humanities,” had clearly had a lasting impact on her because she remembered not only the name of her professor—Mr. De Simone—but also some of the works they discussed, including “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and *The Inferno* by Dante Alighieri. “We had one of those big fat books,” she said, “like a hundred pieces of great literature, which really made you think.” She enjoyed how the professor helped to explain what the author was trying to say. Perhaps this process resonated with her own need to interpret the actions and words of neurotypicals, but figurative language in and of itself was not an impediment to understanding. If you’ve read Temple’s many books, you know that she uses metaphors, novel metaphors, a lot.

You also know that she has an existential bent. There’s a chapter in *Thinking in Pictures* called “Stairway to Heaven: Religion and Belief.” In it she writes, “I had never given much thought to what happens after death, but then I started working with cattle in the Arizona feedlots. Did the animals just turn into beef or did something else happen?” (In the HBO movie *Temple Grandin*, the actress Claire Danes looks down at a dead cow and says, much too loudly and awkwardly, “Where does it go?”) Temple is instinctively drawn to big questions, though in our conversations she was quick to point out that her thinking had changed:

When I was young, I used to search for the magical meaning of life, but now that I’m in my sixties, my meaning has become a whole lot simpler. If the things I do make the world better in some concrete way, like I just had a rancher tell me how they had built some systems
designed and no longer screamed at their cattle or I had someone else tell me that their kid, who has autism, went to college because she read one of my books, well, that’s doing something valuable.

When I asked to what she attributed this change, she replied, with an exaggerated twang, “Gettin’ older, gettin’ older. As I got older, my meaning of life became a whole lot simpler.”

Still, being drawn to big philosophical and ethical questions must have served her well in her “Western Civilization” course, which “[she] was certain she was gonna hate” but which “turned out to be [her] favorite class.” You gotta be kidding me, I thought to myself. “With all of the things that have been written about you, how is it possible that we don’t know this fact?” I said. “Well, no one has ever asked me about literature,” she replied. When I seemed too stupefied to speak, she repeated herself: “No one has ever asked me about literature, but the class I was certain I was gonna hate was actually one of my favorite classes.” She had softened the claim, but nevertheless I was stunned. I wanted to take out an ad on the National Autism Society website. I wanted to live extravagantly on surprise, or at least this surprise. (Alice Walker be damned!)

I had just been given a lesson on the importance of asking the right question. How many times has an autistic person dutifully submitted to the research agenda of someone who has preconceived ideas about autism? Too much of the work being done today is driven by the consensus we call stereotype. Autistics can’t do theory of mind, so let’s study whether they can catch another person’s yawn. As we saw in the chapter about Dora, the research we have is only as good as the questions we ask. Including autistics as our research partners will only improve these questions.

Sadly, I, too, had fallen prey to narrow expectations: for Temple I had selected stories about animals, not, for example, a tricky story about race, such as “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison. Why was it so hard to think of Temple Grandin and John Keats or Temple Grandin and Dante Alighieri together? Why, for that matter, hadn’t I asked her what she wanted to read?

What Temple had affirmed, of course, was the very premise of the liberal arts: introducing young people to subjects they know nothing about and are convinced they will loathe. With this sort of education increasingly under assault, I wondered about the invisible role it had played in her highly specialized professional life. Certainly, learning how to write and to think well had been a boon for the author—to say nothing of the person—she would become. I wondered as well about the strange parallel
between rigid, unimaginative notions of autistic interests (and the subsequent educational tracking that results) and the business of compelling young people to decide on a career trajectory early in their first year of college or university. How can we know in advance what someone might love or be good at?

“But you have to make it interesting,” Temple emphasized, jolting me from my thoughts. “Mr. De Simone made it so interesting. I mean he tried to explain the emotional point the author was trying to get across.” She then added, “I think he had personal problems because he cut quite a few classes.” She remembered being “really disappointed,” as she “wanted to hear what he had to say about the next thing [they] were reading in [their] anthology.” Temple has written about the importance of mentorship, citing William Carlock, a science teacher at Mountain Country School in Rindge, New Hampshire, as having played a crucial role in her development as a scientist. (He figures prominently in the HBO movie about her life.) But here we can see the more limited, though enduring, influence of her humanities professor. She was talking, after all, about a class she had taken in 1966!

After hearing about this class, I was eager to turn to the story “Meat.” A week before our conversation, I received Temple’s written response:

The short story clearly illustrates the mixed emotions about raising an animal that you love and then eating it. Many students in both FFA [Future Farmers of America] and 4-H are sad when their animal is processed, but then they get another animal the following year.

A living animal is not a thing like a car or a house. It must be given a life worth living. The animal would never be born unless we bred it. While it is alive, we must give it a good life.

The summary, in the first paragraph, is commendably concise; the account of the theme or moral, in the second, echoes statements that Temple has made about the obligation to treat commercial livestock ethically.

Yet a literary work is so much more than its paraphrase, as the New Critics would say. “Much of the distempers of criticism come about,” wrote Cleanth Brooks, “from yielding to the temptation to take certain remarks which we make about the poem—statements about what it says or about what truth it gives or about what formulations it illustrates—for the essential core of the poem itself.” In “20–200 on 747,” Heather McHugh wittily confronts this
problem. When a passenger on a plane asks, “What / are your poems about?” she replies,

They’re about
t heir business, and their father’s business, and their
monkey’s uncle, they’re about

how nothing is about, they’re not
about about.

Temple seemed to understand that literature resides, as W. H. Auden said of poetry, in “the valley of its saying.” Its indirection didn’t bother her; to the contrary, she enjoyed it, and she appreciated how a skilled teacher, like a mountain guide, could lead you down into its verdant meanings.

So was her paraphrase just a paraphrase, or did it reflect a less than exemplary appreciation of the story’s subtleties? I glanced at the questions I had prepared: What do you make of the fact that “Meat” is narrated by a seven-year-old girl? Why did the author, C. S. Malerich, choose such a narrator? What do you make of the story’s tone? The girl says things like:

Dad always said we should think about Meat’s feelings and give her a nice life. (61)

[Dad] wanted to find someone committed to a respectful, clean death, even if it meant driving fifty miles. (62)

“Well, you’ve saved me from a life of vegetarianism,” said Dad, half-joking. “Really I can eat meat again with a clear conscience.” (65)

It was probably too much to expect Temple to remember the trope of dramatic irony. In “Meat,” the narrator’s innocence ensures that her words say more—much more—to the reader than she knows. But what is that meaning, and can it be reduced to the propositions that are espoused in Temple’s second paragraph? Put another way, does the story really condone the slaughter of animals? Is the father’s conversion to the “home-raised . . . movement” (56) morally sufficient?

The story is by no means a one-trick pony—or pig—however. It balances irony with genuine pathos and then complicates that admixture with something like a ghoulish paradox. Over the course of the narrative, Meat becomes as much a cherished pet as a future meal. The girl does everything
with her, including taking a bath, which makes the preordained slaughter that much harder to accept. Here’s how she describes Meat’s death:

Mom told me to hug Meat. I did... When I pulled away, she was confused. And then the butcher came up behind her with his stun gun, and his big hand was on her shoulder. She was still looking at me, and there was no more curiosity and no more confusion. Meat was scared.

... It was all over in less than two minutes. [The butcher] stunned her, lifted her, and hung her by one of the hooks above us. Then he cut her throat. Blood came pouring out of her on each side of her head. I wondered if it wasn’t too late, if they couldn’t stop it and fix her... I’d always thought about [death] like a light switch you flicked off. But here was Meat, not on or off. (64–65)

The girl felt “as if the butcher had stunned [her], too” (65). “Everything I heard seemed to come from very far away, and every move I made seemed like it was someone else making it” (65), she reports. As she was ushered out of the room, she looked back at her mother, who had opposed the idea of raising their own livestock. “Isn’t it enough we spend twice as much on organic?” (56), she had groused to her husband. Her mother was holding Meat, “like the way sometimes she still held me even though I was too big for it” (65), the girl notes, adding, “Meat was definitely too big for it” (65).

This sort of matter-of-fact naiveté turns macabre as she is fully initiated into the regime of humane slaughter. “It was a few weeks before I was over [Meat’s death]” (67), she tells us. “I got a little better after we ate her... With the tender flesh practically melting on my tongue, I thought Dad was right—something you raise yourself always tastes better” (67). Here, the ethical imperative produces an unexpected (and, to the reader, ghastly) boon: gustatory pleasure. The story refuses to collapse, like a portable chair, into platitude: even if it believes in humane slaughter as a practical necessity, its primary allegiance is to what Brooks called the “recognition of incongruities.” There’s no easy way to reconcile caring and killing. In a closing gesture, the girl relates that she didn’t fully recover from the loss of Meat until her eighth birthday: “That’s when we got Drumstick” (68), she says.

As I was asking my first question, Temple interrupted me: “I couldn’t figure out what kind of animal it was. It’s gotta be a pig, but it doesn’t say so.” I had
noticed this omission myself, yet it didn’t bother me the way it seemed to bother her.

“Do you think that’s because the narrator’s a child?” I inquired.

“I don’t know, but I kept waiting for her to say it was a pig. I wanted more detail about the animal.” Of course she did. *How could I have been so stupid?* I thought to myself. *Choosing a story about an animal in which the animal is vague?* A sense of panic ballooned inside me.

“Why did the author pick the girl, and not the father, for instance, to be the narrator?”

“Well, she reminded me of 4-H and FFA kids I’ve met,” Temple replied.

“Okay, but what does hearing about this familiar topic from the point of view of a child accomplish? What does it add to the debate, with the PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] folks on one side and the ranchers on another?”

“It makes it personal,” she said, which was certainly true. I was trying to get her to analyze the story itself, not the topic it engages. I often have this problem with beginning students, and I need to show them how to look for meaning in the context of aesthetic form—to see it emerging from form, like smoke from a fire. Because Temple hadn’t been in a humanities classroom for half a century, her tendency to make statements about the story was understandable.

“But what is literature?” I pressed.

“It’s a way of expressing complicated things in an accessible manner,” she said, pausing to offer an example from Dante’s *Inferno*: “When I took that literature class in college, a long time ago—I think my mother still has the book somewhere—the professor explained why the middle of hell is cold.” The image had stayed with her over the years, and she returned to it a number of times in our conversations. (Having discussed the spiritual landscape of Silko’s novel with Jamie, I recalled suddenly how spatial Dante’s poem is, what with the circles, rings, ditches, and rounds laid out, as if by some surveyor, within the earth.)

In the poem, Satan flaps his wings, and the wind they generate turns water in the lowest circle of hell to ice. The more he tries to escape, the more he becomes immured. “It’s a paradox,” Temple claimed, and though she didn’t directly tie the idea of paradox to the story “Meat,” I sensed that that’s what she was trying to say about killing livestock. The image of Satan half-encased in ice, literally precipitating the terms of his own misery, conveys a
complex psychological truth. This paragon of fiery rage is entirely removed from the warmth of God.

Before I could make the link to “Meat” explicit, she launched into a discussion of ambiguity, and she used a recent film, *Eye in the Sky*, to make her point. Temple travels so much that she ends up seeing lots of movies. In fact, on a recent flight to Australia, she saw four in a row.

The film explores the notion of collateral damage in the “War on Terror” by presenting a scenario in which British and American intelligence officers have a chance to take out a terrorist they’ve been hunting for years. The calculations about collateral damage fall within acceptable limits and, the drone operators, some five thousand miles away, are about to pull the trigger. But then a girl wanders into the picture and sets up a bread stand close to the terrorist’s house, which attracts customers. Unwilling to let the terrorist enact his plan, one of the officers pressures the man who is responsible for predicting collateral damage to lessen his assessment. The missile is fired and the girl at the bread stand is killed.

Temple relished *Eye in the Sky*. She was “blown away by the ethical issues it raises—how complex they are”—and she was sensitive to the predicament of the drone operators who must live with the consequences of their all-too-remote actions. In the film they are quite disturbed by the death of the girl. When I later watched the movie, it reminded me of a line by John Updike: “It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules.” And another by F. Scott Fitzgerald: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

Although she clearly evinced a sophisticated understanding of ambiguity, Temple once again failed to tie the literary device she was speaking about to “Meat.” Her mind was as associative as she claimed, and it did “wander off the subject.” Not too far off, mind you, because she had simply moved from ambiguity in one arena to ambiguity in another. As with a connect-the-dots puzzle, she seemed to be inviting me to draw a line between these two provocative points, to view the killing of livestock as akin to the killing of human beings with drones. Both present terribly vexing quandaries. Both demand an ability to function. And yet clearly there are differences between these things as well—big differences.

In *Thinking in Pictures* she had written, “People with more severe autism have difficulty stopping endless associations. . . . When I find my mind wan-
dering too far away from a design problem I am trying to solve, I just tell myself to get back to the problem.” I could have pushed Temple to be more focused, to make the link between the film and the story apparent, but it was our first conversation, and I really wanted to see where her thoughts would take her. Besides, she’d encouraged me to ponder the eternal punishments of intelligence officials—and perhaps even industrial butchers. But was she indicting herself, or was she critiquing the strict code of justice in the *Inferno*? The leap from cows to Dante and from Dante to suicide bombers seemed to have something to do with complicating a conventional moral calculus.

... 

Of course, Temple had explicitly addressed the paradox of caring and killing in her writings. Her first encounter with a meatpacking plant in Arizona triggered a dream in which the white walls of the six-story building appeared to be a “sacred altar.” After she killed her first cow, she came to terms with the inevitable fact of death, which allowed her, she said, to appreciate life more fully. Later, when she designed a new cattle ramp and conveyor restraining system, which she named “the Stairway to Heaven,” she remembered driving around the plant and “look[ing] upon it as if it were Vatican City.” These descriptions carry some of the strange, earnest glee of the narrator’s comments in “Meat.” I say “strange” because, viewed from another perspective, Temple’s Vatican City resembles a concentration camp for cattle.

Animal sacrifice and its close relative ritual slaughter have been practiced for millennia in cultures around the world. The conundrum of killing domesticated livestock with whom one has a caring relationship is resolved—or at least managed—through the notion of God-fearing respect. Recall the scene depicted on the urn in Keats’s poem. Temple would gladly impose such a framework on the slaughter and processing of animals. “I believe that the place where an animal dies is a sacred one,” she has written. “There is a need to bring ritual into the conventional slaughter plants, and to use it as a means to shape people’s behavior. It would help to prevent them from becoming numbed . . . or cruel.”

What makes this attitude so striking in Temple is her ability to preserve the particularity of the animals on a grand scale. (Here, she parts company with those conducting the “War on Terror”: for them, “violent jihadists” dissolve into an undifferentiated mass.) Visually, in the plant, it’s as if she had a relationship with each cow, as if she were working on a small farm or, like the girl in “Meat,” engaged in a modest suburban experiment. This is perhaps
what annoyed her about the story: the animal should have been described in more detail, and by naming it “Meat,” the family was working at cross-purposes: it insisted on respect but, at the same time, it denied the pig its individuality. It settled for “abstractification” (one of Temple’s favorite neologisms), as if all caring and truthful roads led there. The animal was finally its use value.

Stalin—yes, I’m quoting that monster again—said, “If one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics.” Cognitively callous, “the cockroach,” as Korney Chukovsky and Osip Mandelstam referred to him, reveals in the extreme the problem with neurotypical thinking. Animal activists, no matter how noble their intentions, rail against the meat industry in general. “They attack[] things,” Temple complains, “they don’t . . . know anything about.” By “know” she means, experience sensorially, particularly, in the way that a cow with its much smaller frontal lobes experiences its handling. Whereas she digs like a mole beneath the idea of slaughter, working to prevent pain and fear, her activist counterpart ambles above it, heralding horror. To the latter, the ground of death appears undisturbed; to the former, a packed church of detail, to which her ethics belong, sings below.

Compassionate slaughter requires, Temple contends, a bottom-up approach: “To design a good restrainer system . . . you have to imagine what it would be like if you were the animal entering it.” Adopting what she calls a “cow’s eye view,” she deploys her “visual skills to simulate what an animal would see and hear in a given situation.” Is that shadow, for instance, spooking it? How about that rattling gate? Temple “credit[s] autism for enabling [her] to understand cattle”—in particular, the long-range underconnectivity that frees “raw [sensory] data” from frontal lobe homogenization and abstraction. During sensory simulations there are “no words in [her] head at all, just pictures. . . . Words come in . . . after [she’s] finished thinking [a problem through].”

Abidingly practical, she values those “who produce tangible results.” And what could be more tangible than a happy cow or, conversely, a gleaming, shrink-wrapped package of ground beef? If Temple were a Christian (and not simply someone with spiritual yearnings), she would favor the “works” side of the great “faith vs. works” debate. Fifty percent of the cattle entering slaughter plants in this country move through center-track restrainer systems that she designed. Like those intelligence officers in Eye in the Sky, she is also a realist, and we may label her approach to the caring-and-killing
dilemma “sensory pragmatism.” Because carnivores, as Jesus might have said, will always be with us, for her “the question is: what should a humane feed-lot and slaughterhouse be like?”

In this way, people are understandably confused by what she does. From one perspective, she resembles the most abominable killer (she’s the Pol Pot of chuck and loin); from another, a saint (say, Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi). “The strongest feeling I have today is one of intense calm and serenity as I handle cattle and feel them relax under my care,” she has said. Except in a religious context, we’re unaccustomed to finding love and death so inextricably bound. It’s like a knotty piece of maple: no matter how sharp the ax, it can’t be neatly split.

But what about emotion? Does it inform her sense of paradox? Temple has plenty of “sensory empathy”—her term for adopting a cow’s eye view—yet she says she is steadfastly logical. So reluctant is she to conceive of herself as a feeling creature that she invents an entirely different form of empathy, one neither cognitive nor emotional. Was she disturbed by Meat’s slaughter? Or, if not disturbed, affected by its ambiguous depiction? It was time to inquire about this bugaboo.

“Did the story move you?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t get overly emotional,” she replied. “But the words created images in my head, and they moved me.” With that we were off to the races. It was like being on a giant water slide. She cried, she told me, at the end of Titanic, when Jack and Rose don’t get to be together. She cried as well listening to “The Widow Maker,” a song about a man named Billy Mack who steers his rig off the road to save a stalled pickup filled with kids—like Rose, his lover, Wanda Anne, is left alone. Contrary to what many think, Temple has an acute sense of tragedy. “I can’t even think about that song without getting upset,” she remarked. From “The Widow Maker,” her mind leapt to a truck she had seen on the highway. A sign said, “We Ship Anything Anywhere.” “You wanna make a bet,” Temple laughed. “I’ll make you a load you won’t ship again because it’s gonna be gross!” And then she was telling me about a time she laughed so hard on a plane while watching a movie that everyone turned around and stared at her.

In Thinking in Pictures she had written, “Modulating emotions is difficult for me. . . . My emotion is either turned on or all turned off.” A good deal of the time it’s the latter, and she was eager to point out the hidden advantage. “I find in science—and I am just horrified at this—that I can review a
journal article by somebody I don’t like and be totally objective. With other people, they can’t seem to separate hating the person from reviewing their research. I can separate the two things.” She found the common investment in partisan politics equally horrifying: “It blows my mind how irrational normal people are. . . . With certain subjects, certain hot-button social issues, which I will not discuss—I save that for the voting booth—their brains completely shut down.”

When I asked Temple to account for such irrationality, she replied, “It’s normal human behavior and to me it’s scary.” She explained that her own “emotions aren’t hooked up quite tight.” But she has also said that her emotions are “reduced and simplified in some areas”; they are “more like the emotions of a child than an adult.” She has even said they are more like those of cattle. Subtle social-emotional cues elude her. In Animals in Translation, she notably remarked, “Autism made . . . social life hard, but it made animals easy.”

How to make sense of these patchwork comments? Temple is decidedly logical, yet music and animals seem to trigger her emotions. For one thing, music appears to remove the barriers that some autistics report to feeling, recognizing, and labeling emotions. A study from 2014 found no difference between the way autistics and nonautistics process the emotional aspects of music. In contrast, considerable research has demonstrated significant variation in ordinary social cognition. Thus, Temple’s response to “The Widow Maker” or “My Heart Will Go On” could be quite different from her response, say, to a dispute between colleagues in her department. Interestingly, a study from 2015 found that when words are sung as opposed to spoken, autistic processing of language matches that of nonautistic processing. Music may have an integrative force that consciously stitches emotion and higher-order thought together.

The fact that touching cattle allowed her to feel what nonautistics feel isn’t that surprising. Temple encounters the world primarily through her senses, yet her senses are neither typically integrated nor typically connected to other systems in the brain. It’s as if she were two different people: a visually rational one and a tactile, feeling one. While her eyes solve engineering problems, her hands solve ethical problems. In The Autistic Brain, after discovering the difference between object- and spatial-visualizers and labeling herself the former, she comments, “I see like an artist, . . . but I don’t feel like one.”

Yet that’s not quite right because the visual for her is linked to anxiety. To take in the kind of detail that she takes in produces hypervigilance, a state of
constant arousal. In our conversations she referred to visual thinkers as “real panic monsters” and noted that many of them take Prozac, which has “kept them out of the gutter and straightened out their lives.” She herself has been on Prozac since 1980, and while she admits that it has “attenuated many of [her] emotions,” she can’t function without it. “Imagine if we closed up all of the doors in an auditorium,” she said to me, “and then put in the most poisonous snakes in the world and turned off the lights. Well, that’s the way I was all of the time until I took antidepressant medication.”

Neuroimaging of Temple’s brain appears to confirm her struggles with anxiety. Her amygdalae, which play a central role in processing emotion, especially fear, are 22 percent larger than the average person’s. “My amygdalae are telling me I have everything to fear, including fear itself,” she has written. In the aforementioned study of emotionally avoidant readers, the authors pointed out that “increased sympathetic nervous system reactivity” often lurks behind an aloof or inexpressive demeanor: “Avoidantly attached people tend to avoid the experience of emotions, especially negative emotions, and this gives rise to what appears to be a paradox—a subjective self-report of reduced emotionality accompanied by physiological measures that imply increased emotionality.” This statement seemed, when I read it, to fit Temple to a t.

When as a teenager she noticed that cattle relaxed in their squeeze chutes, she famously built one for herself; she was desperate for the panic attacks to stop. In addition to teaching her empathy for animals, the machine gave her “feelings of kindness and gentleness toward other people—social feelings.” In *Thinking in Pictures* she wrote, “To have feelings of gentleness, one must experience gentle bodily comfort. As my nervous system learned to tolerate the soothing pressure from my squeeze machine, I discovered that the comforting feeling made me a kinder and gentler person.” In the HBO movie, Danes explains, “It feels like a wire gets reconnected.”

And so through touch Temple received glimpses of ordinary feeling and sociality, but mostly she relied on what experts have termed “hacking”: a more labor-intensive, “cognitively mediated processing of social information.” To me, the metaphor initially evoked an image of crude, as opposed to surgical, cutting: someone inelegantly accessing the organs of the social body. Now it has a digital resonance. Temple was like some console cowboy or WikiLeaks activist stealing the files of basic human interaction. She deliberately thought her way into the world, using her talent for visual imagery to compensate for the absence of intuitive emotional processing.
Her commitment to the cognitive deepened when she discovered that it could help tame anxiety. As a young woman, she survived the emergency landing and evacuation of a plane she was traveling in, which subsequently rendered her a white-knuckle flier. The only way she could get over the fright was “to make aircraft interesting.” “In order not to be afraid, I have to be interested,” she told me, and to be interested is to learn everything there is to know about a topic. Such a coping strategy proved to be a boon in academia—especially the sciences, where she found a congenially rational atmosphere.

A different brain whose visual proclivities generate anxiety thus turns to medication, cognitive mastery, and a career that rewards logical thought. Each of these things then acts as a reinforcer for the others in an endless biocultural loop, with the result being that conscious emotion becomes a kind of foundling, appearing on this doorstep and that but never joining, as it were, the family.

A good deal of the time, her feelings seemed to be locked in some sort of basement, fully alive there but unable to communicate with the people living above. Or they were like a scuba diver who fails to return to the surface, floating with an endless supply of oxygen in a watery limbo. Temple, of course, didn’t think of herself this way—no, she blamed autism and autism alone for truncating, if not eliminating, emotion. Her vision of herself was narrowly neurological. Indeed, she has compared herself to patients for whom a stroke has spared everything else but emotion.

Attracted to the study of avoidantly attached readers, yet not entirely certain that it applied to Temple, I had wondered whether reading literary fiction might ameliorate this problem. According to some researchers, even those with “intact behavioral ability” in autism reveal electrophysiological differences in how they process social information, leading some to worry that “interventions . . . focus[ing] on cognitive appraisals of emotional information may fail to address the core deficit underlying emotion recognition impairment in this population.” Literature, of course, is not only sensory-driven, and as such designed to simulate experience, but also drenched in feeling. While poetry more clearly approximates the condition of music, fiction is hardly just a cognitive appraisal of human sociality—there’s nothing “hacked” about it.

Ironically, Temple has pointed to literature to illustrate what she cannot feel. Despite having deployed the idiom of “mixed emotions” in her written response to “Meat,” this sort of blending, she insists, escapes her:
As far as I can figure out, complex emotion occurs when a person feels two opposite emotions at once. Samuel Clemens, the author of *Tom Sawyer*, wrote that “the secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow,” and Virginia Woolf wrote, “The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, and one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.” I understand these ideas, but I don’t experience emotion in this way.

Although she claims to have “replaced emotional complexity with visual and intellectual complexity,” she may be selling herself short. After all, she once confessed in print, “It is a sobering experience to be a caring person, yet to design a device to kill large numbers of animals. When I complete a project I am left with a feeling of great satisfaction, but I usually cry all the way to the airport.”

Is this not emotional complexity? In J. D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, the narrator laments, “I can’t be running back and forth forever between grief and high delight.” Clearly Temple grasps this sort of mental messenger service: as in the days of old, runners, homing pigeons, and riders on horseback deliver to us our inconstant, psychological response to life. Maybe her emotions weren’t mixed at the time, but the reflection tries to account for them simultaneously. What Robert Penn Warren said of the poet may also be said of this livestock equipment designer: she “wishes to indicate that [her] vision . . . can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience.” I’m certain she would agree with Martha Nussbaum who speaks of “an ineliminable residue of tragedy in the relationships between humans and animals.”

But did the story itself elicit emotion? Could I feel this sense of tragedy in Temple’s comments about “Meat”? Our discussion yielded no real evidence of greater emotionality—or at least what might pass as such. She hadn’t mentioned crying or feeling sad. Her response, while associative, was conspicuously intellectual—even when I asked her to report on the feelings that the story may have aroused. I say “conspicuously intellectual,” but I could just as easily have said “passionately intellectual,” for she was animated in the way that a good teacher is animated. She was happy to be talking about the story’s ideas—or, rather, talking about the story’s ideas made her happy—but its pathos (or negative emotions) seemed to be cordoned off like a crime scene. (In my mind I could almost see the yellow tape.)

At one point, she mentioned wanting to teach the story in a class. In fact, she spoke of assigning pieces from all points of view, including those of
ranchers. I quickly joined the discussion, excited by the prospect. Here, we were like a double scull or coxless pair, plowing through the waters of course design. “You gotta make kids think,” she said. “Nothing is simple.”

And then somehow we were back to poetry and that class from 1966: she remembered a line, which she recited, from William Wordsworth’s poem “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”: “Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy.” “When he was young,” Temple said, “he was open to all kinds of experience and then, you know, experience gets ossified.” I was amazed—most students couldn’t remember a line of poetry from last semester! Was Temple talking about the girl in the story, the girl who, like this boy, “daily farther from the east / must travel”? When we leave her, the narrator of “Meat” is already thinking as a monarch from the throne of her head rather than as a commoner from the soil of her feet. I don’t know, and I didn’t ask because Temple had to board her plane. “Gotta go,” she said.

When I hung up, I thought more about the Wordsworth poem—specifically its concluding lines:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

I wondered if these lines couldn’t serve as a rejoinder to any simple thought-emotion dichotomy or to any spatial mapping that necessarily places the latter below the former. The speaker, who has lost the “visionary gleam” of childhood, the sense of an immanent god in nature, and who finds strength “in the faith that looks through death, / in years that bring the philosophic mind,” imagines an alternative to immediate, visible emotion. Temple, I want to say, could feel such thoughts—or think such feelings.

... OUR SECOND CONVERSATION, three weeks later, was much more leisurely. I caught her at her home in Fort Collins, Colorado, on a Wednesday evening. I was in Columbia, Maryland, at an autism conference. “So, let’s just start with the simple question: Did you enjoy ‘The Ecstatic Cry’?”

“Well, it wasn’t something I was familiar with,” Temple answered. “I got a lot of pictures of what, you know, would be going on in Antarctica in my mind ’cause I think visually.”
“Any other reactions?”

“It definitely brought up the whole idea of ambivalence. I mean, the guy jumping in and drowning?”

She was referring to the story’s climax. After an excursion to an island, a passenger on a tour boat fails to return—he plans to commit suicide when the boat departs. His wife, we later find out, left him; they were supposed to take an anniversary trip together. The narrator, a misanthropic marine biologist whose research is funded by the tour boat company—she studies gentoo penguins—hears splashing in the frigid bay and rescues the man. To fend off hypothermia, they remove their clothing and physically warm one another. Though each of them feels conflicted, sex ensues. In the morning, when the narrator awakens, the man is gone. He’s later found dead in the water.

I had chosen this story by Midge Raymond because I thought Temple might identify with a character who had renounced intimate relationships for an animal-centered career, but then suddenly, and almost involuntarily, reconsidered. I wanted not so much for her to talk about her celibacy as to see if the story would tap into that decision and, by tapping into it, generate insights about her life. Yet not only about her life—about the story itself, in a continuing process.

The literary critic David Miall, in “Emotions and the Structuring of Narrative Responses,” writes about “the integrative capacity of feeling.” Literature, he argues, triggers “evocations, boundary-crossings, and modification.” The first are simply emotion-laden memories of personal experience; the second are tentative connections between these memories and what happens in the text; and the third is a reconsideration of the original emotion. For Miall, literature constitutes an “effective vehicle[] for calling up feelings and modifying their significance.”

Following the work of Damasio and others, Miall assumes the “primacy of emotion.” He sees emotion as “initiating and directing” the reader’s cognitive understanding, and he nicely sketches the role of the amygdala, which is ever alert to harm or threat, in processing the trope of ambiguity. An evolutionary inheritance designed to keep us alive finds itself responding to a textual version of what Richard Davison calls “underdetermined contingencies, such as novel, ‘surprising’ or ‘ambiguous’ stimuli.” It’s as if the lion that chased our forbearers had moved onto the page. (Did you see that yellow flash of metaphor?)

Because the amygdala is also involved in the formation of autobiographical memories, especially ones “derived from emotionally arousing events,”
it’s the perfect engine for readerly engagement, and, at the start, the frontal lobes need not know it’s even running. Think of reading literature as akin to riding in a Mercedes, where the tony craftsmanship conceals everything but the sound of your own thoughts and the songs on the radio. Emotion, to be clear, propels the reader; it’s less a response to something than a condition for thinking. As Miall writes,

If textual indeterminacy, whether arising from description, character, or action, is a particular force for the elicitation of a reader’s feelings (and associated cognitions), it provides a more congenial framework for the enactive . . . rather than reactive understanding of emotion. . . . In this perspective, literary reading seems likely to provide a continuously renewed array of affordances: each point of ambiguity represents a nexus of affective possibilities.

Each point of ambiguity provides a chance to reevaluate both story and self. But is this true in autism, specifically in Temple’s form of autism? I’d already witnessed how unemotional she could be with a story about ritual slaughter, but perhaps that story’s subject was too familiar, and perhaps its familiarity made it even easier to remain in cognitive mode. She seemed genuinely surprised by “The Ecstatic Cry”; I could hear it in her voice when she mentioned the suicidal tourist. If the amygdalae play a crucial role in literary reading, what does it mean that hers are so large and overactive? Furthermore, what does it mean that she takes medication to dampen their effects?

Reader-response criticism, of which cognitive literary studies is an offshoot, asks us to take seriously what individual readers bring to literature: their experiences, their age, their gender, their race, their class, and so forth. See It Feelingly may be thought of as adding a person’s neurology to the list, though not necessarily as a factor that trumps all others. And not as some kind of monolith that affects people in exactly the same way. Nor as something that forecloses typical responses.

If my description of reader-response criticism seems a little dry, then I encourage you to conceive of it as sometimes akin to introducing Mentos Mints to a jug of Diet Coke. As any fan of YouTube knows, the eruption can be quite impressive. When my son, DJ, read about Harriet Tubman, his feelings, if you recall, shot up some fifteen feet into the air. How would Temple the animal scientist and Temple the celibate woman and Temple the autist who struggles with emotion interact with “The Ecstatic Cry”?
“Please describe the narrator,” I said, expecting, though not explicitly asking for, a psychological portrait.

“She wants to get rid of all the people, and that’s not gonna work. If they don’t get money from those tour boats, they’re probably not gonna be funded. You need the fees from the tourists to pay for the research.” Although she had begun by talking about a psychological concern, the drowned man’s “ambivalence,” Temple moved quickly to a matter of practical importance.

Early in the story the narrator complains:

Because we’re in one of the last pristine environments in the world, we go to great lengths to protect the animals from anything foreign. Visitors sterilize their boots before setting foot on the island, and again when they depart. . . . I’ve seen tourists drop used tissues and gum wrappers, not knowing or caring enough to pick them up. I want to chase after them, . . . to tell them how much the fate of the penguins has changed as more and more tourists pass through these islands. (89–90)

When a tourist slips on the ice and hits his head, the narrator cares not a whit about his welfare: “His blood is an unwelcome sight,” she states, “bright and thin amid the ubiquitous dark-pink guano of the penguins, and replete with new bacteria, which could be deadly for the birds” (88). She even makes fun of the man for being overweight.

After I read these passages aloud, Temple commented, “If you look at things in Africa, I mean if elephants are just horrible creatures that destroy your crops, you’re not gonna want to save them. You gotta make it so people in Africa want to protect the elephants.”

She was ignoring the story as story. Couldn’t she see how defensive the narrator was? How her commitment to the environment was infused with a deep aversion to human intimacy? Was Temple being emotionally avoidant or stereotypically autistic—or both? I couldn’t tell. So much for identification, I thought to myself.

But what precisely did I mean by identification? And what sort of feeling did I think powered it? “In sympathy,” writes Mar and colleagues, we feel bad for a character whose goals are not being met, but we do not need to model these goals . . . in order to do so. In identification, we take on these goals and plans as our own, and see ourselves as the
character feeling what he or she feels. In empathy, we understand a character’s goals through our model of his or her mind, and feel something similar to what the character feels, but we do not see ourselves as that character and identify these emotions as our own rather than as the character’s.

With sympathy, in other words, the reader is more of a spectator; with empathy, a kind of fellow traveler. Recent research stresses the importance of “emotional transportation” for positive changes in empathy. The reader, in short, must lose herself in the narrative. While Temple’s visual cortex had clearly traveled to Antarctica, her feelings seemed to have stayed at home.

“I’m a very logical person,” she continued, “so I focus on policy. You won’t have money for research if you don’t have tour boats, but you gotta do it in a way that protects the wildlife ’cause I know with chimpanzees, for example, and gorillas, you have to make sure they don’t get people diseases.”

I was thinking about sex, my wife would later joke, while she was thinking about how to solve intractable environmental problems. (In the HBO movie, to drive home Temple’s failure to understand romance, Danes is pictured watching TV. She passes over a program in which two lovers passionately kiss for one in which a lion rips apart its prey.)

“Okay, I get that,” I said, “but why does the author present a character who is at once deeply critical of her own species and yet so forlorn?” In the story, when her married research partner, Thom, accompanies the tourist who fell to the nearest medical facility, the narrator reports, “I feel a sudden, sharp loneliness, like an intake of cold air” (91). She describes herself as “comfortably isolated” (91) in Antarctica, and yet she aches for human companionship. Of Dennis, the man she saved, she says, “I watch his fingers on my arm, and I am reminded of the night before, when only Thom and I were here, and Thom had helped me wash my hair. The feel of his hands on my scalp, on my neck, had run through my entire body, tightening into a coil of desire that never fully vanished” (100).

“I don’t know why she’s forlorn,” Temple replied. “I’ve interacted with a lot of people who become really interested in wildlife, and some of them are loners.” The story has Dennis use this very word to describe the narrator. When the biologist pulls him out of the water, she yells, “What are you doing here? What the hell happened?” (95–96). She doesn’t know that he was trying to kill himself. Later, after they’ve talked a bit, he turns the question back on her: “What are you doing here?” (98) he asks, adding, “You’d have to be a
real loner to enjoy being [in Antarctica]” (98). “I’m just not a people person, that’s all” (100), she responds nervously. Pitting the instinct to mate against a woman’s commitment to her career, the story introduces the wild card of an individual psyche, one that hides behind environmental logic.

Here, I thought initially, I was coming up against an autistic wall: the standard account of imaginative and empathetic deficits, which seemed, in this case, not so much to be true as to be not entirely false. For the life of her, Temple couldn’t detect the drama behind the narrator’s words. I wanted her to get inside of the conflict, to move around as in an unlit attic or crawl-space under a house. (Reading a novel or story is like living in a time before electricity.) But at every turn, she balked, remaining on the front porch and simply looking in through a window.

Yet maybe “balk” isn’t the right descriptor? She said that she focuses on policy—it’s what she’s good at—what, for a host of reasons, comes naturally. And anyway why would she identify with someone who wasn’t a pragmatist, whose environmental views, in fact, were mercilessly extreme? Temple didn’t want to get rid of human beings; nor did she want them to stop eating meat. Why, for that matter, would she identify with a human character instead of an animal one?

I took another stab at a sense of interiority. “What did you make of the story’s conclusion—that final image of animal grief?”

As she leaves her research post, the narrator spots an emperor penguin, the only species in which the male cares for the egg and the female “travel[s] a hundred miles across the frozen ocean . . . to forage for food” (93). By the time the female “is fat and ready to feed her chick” (93), the male is typically near death. “Still hopeful about marriage and grandkids” (93), the narrator’s mother says her daughter thinks like an emperor: she “expect[s] a man to sit tight and wait patiently while [she] disappear[s] across the ice” (93). Believing she’s lost her chance at love, the narrator pictures the ecstatic cry: that ritual in which, heads bobbing, beaks raised, the emperor couple reunites. But the penguin she sees has waited too long to return: the male has left, the chick is dead, and the female has assumed “the hunched posture of sorrow” (106).

“Well,” Temple responded, “there are stories about a dog that would go down to a Japanese railway station every day at four o’clock when his master returned from work. After the master died, the dog kept going down to the train station—every afternoon for months and months, but the master never came.”

It couldn’t be clearer: she wasn’t going to slop through the mud and mouse droppings beneath our fictional home. She didn’t relate to the marine biologist.
(She didn’t seem to relate to relating.) She certainly didn’t conceive of herself as a loner. Traveling as much as she does, she meets with more people in a month than most of us do in a year. I remember jotting down in my notebook: *Her mind is like an airline hub from which she randomly catches flights in all directions.*

...  

**AT THIS POINT, I must stop the narrative and cry foul—against myself.** I must admit that I was so intent on proving literature could move Temple that I lost sight of the spectacle I was precipitating: a disability studies scholar and proponent of neurodiversity straining to recover a norm—a norm of neurology and reading! Why, you might reasonably ask, must she be emotional? Why must she identify with anyone, let alone a character who has sex with a distraught stranger? Why can’t she just be different?  

For one thing, I couldn’t accede to a strictly neurological account of her personhood. Surely culture had played some role in shaping her. For another, I couldn’t accept a static—and potentially cynical—idea of neurodiversity. In such a version of the concept, we are called upon as parents, physicians, or educators “to be realistic” about impairment, “to face facts,” to stop dreaming. “We were able to move forward and accommodate our son,” writes Mark Osteen, the editor of *Autism and Representation,* “only after we realized that our high expectations for him were unfair, even damaging. Presuming competence was often exactly what hindered us all the most.” Don’t, in other words, expect a rhinoceros to fly. Don’t even expect it to play with the other rhinos. “Learn[] to see and accept your loved one as he or she is, rather than trying to normalize or change the person.”  

Let us stipulate, at least for the sake of argument, that Osteen is right about his son, yet when we know so little about autism and when we’ve frequently been wrong in our pronouncements, there is enormous peril in accepting anything. And, anyway, autistic brains, like neurotypical ones, are plastic. In letting Grandin be Grandin we may be *taking her for Grandin,* as Bertrand Russell might say. Can we presume competence without striving for normalcy? I think so, but in my quest to uncover emotion, I was certainly muddying the waters.  

When I thought more about Temple’s response to that final image of animal grief, I, of course, recognized how appropriate it was. Her “cow’s eye view” had become a penguin’s waddle: *she was identifying with the animal,* not erasing it with metaphor, as the narrator does. Yes, the woman in the story
prefers penguins to humans and, yes, she rightly attributes feeling to them, but in the end, the animal drama is merely an occasion to reflect on herself. Temple was doing, in her own way, what Dora had done with those persecuted androids in Dick’s novel. (Let’s not forget that Temple cried when H A L in 2001: A Space Odyssey was taken apart.) She was vigorously relating to “the more than human,” and she was doing it, as my friend Gillian Silverman proposed, by telling another story, by flying, as it were, supersonically from Antarctica to Japan. If Temple’s mind is like an airline hub, then the flights she catches are so quick she doesn’t even have to pack a bag or pass through security! It’s more like Star Trek: “Beam me up, Scottie.”

The two stories (about the penguin and the dog) occupied the same space—they lay side by side like beds in a room—but they didn’t interact in an expected manner. They were cautious, you might say, respectful. They didn’t reject communication so much as imply a strong preference for company, for proximity—the way that an autistic child might want to be in a room with his family but not conventionally interact. “Let’s just be together,” the stories said.

Temple’s reaction to “The Ecstatic Cry,” was, in Gillian’s words, a rejection of the “neurotypical propensity toward becoming a character,” a rejection of “the kind of empathy that resembles possession—an entering into and knowing the Other.” It may even reveal a problem with empathy itself—with the interiority it assumes. Reminded of Temple’s comment about making sure that chimpanzees and gorillas don’t get “people diseases,” Gillian mused, “Maybe neurotypical empathy is a ‘people disease.’” What would be contagious and sometimes lethal in this scenario is not raw, boundary-less emotion, but the unwarranted conviction that we know how to properly engage with, know wisely what’s best for and what rightly to expect from, the Other. In a flash, I became that dreaded tourist who drops his ethnographical tissues and gum wrappers all over the place.

And yet, even now, as I accept this critique, I still hold out for a psychological Grandin—or at least a neuropsychological Grandin. Make that a neuropsychological and historically contingent Grandin! Why can’t she be avoidantly attached and exquisitely different?

Watching her flail at my line of questioning, I began, I remember, to feel bad. Had I really expected her to be moved by the narrator’s sudden change of heart—or loins? In my eagerness to put pressure on the assumption that autistic people can’t handle, or don’t want, romantic relationships, I
had assumed that a life without romance and sex was necessarily lacking. I had envisioned—cue the orchestra; dim the lights—a nearly operatic admission of regret. Recovering yet another norm, I had pitied her, which is no venial sin when it comes to disability.

Worse, I had borrowed the story’s saturnine landscape and reinstated the most pernicious of clichés: the autist as person alone. “A more inhospitable place could scarcely be imagined,” wrote a member of Ernest Shackleton’s disastrous Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Of that other pole, the explorer Frederick Albert Cook once exclaimed, “We were the only pulsating creatures in a dead world of ice.” While no one believes anymore in refrigerator mothers, all sorts of people believe in freezer autistics. I had wanted Temple to disrupt the cliché, but when she didn’t . . . ? (As I write this paragraph, my mind drifts to the southernmost region of Hell where Satan, as though autistic himself, flaps his rime-covered wings.)

If you Google “interviews with Temple Grandin,” you will see how often she is asked about this supposed lacuna in her humanity. In one interview, she does, in fact, express regret about having never found love, but she says she has an “exciting career.” And who could argue with that? When I waded into these waters—“Do you feel the, I mean do you feel the same way about yourself and romantic love as you once did?”—she graciously threw me a life preserver: “You know when I am the happiest: when I’m trying to problem-solve. Or when I’m teaching. I wanna get my students into careers they’re gonna like, jobs where they’re gonna do some good in the world.”

She spoke about students who had “trashed their careers because of breakin’ up with boyfriends and romance.” “So much psycho-drama, ugh!” she said. The career-minded Temple seemed to have taken the dais—her voice was now confident, even upbeat—and I remembered an interesting detail from the study of avoidantly attached readers. In the control condition, where the Chekhov story had been robbed of its artistic elements, the “self-reported happiness of High Avoidance participants increased while that of Low Avoidance participants decreased.”

The authors reasoned that the “complex attachment issues presented in the documentary text functioned as an argument—close personal relationships are trouble and bad for you”—thus confirming the strongly held view of this group. In contrast, “Low Avoidance” participants were disappointed by the documentary text. If Temple were somehow translating the story into argument, if aided by autism and years of emotionally avoidant behavior, she could, like some sort of antiliterary superhero, block the story’s mysterious
effects, then she would be anything but “defenseless against art,” in the authors’ phrase.

But then, as if right on cue, which is to say when all hope of an emotional response seemed to be lost, a rather straightforward point about the need for women to focus on their own professional fulfillment suddenly became more urgent. “The thing that is beyond my imagination,” Temple remarked, “is how a woman can stay with a guy that’s abusing her. The only reason I can think to do that is economic necessity. I’d be gettin’ money and buryin’ it in the garden in a jar.” Was she referring to one of her students, or to something more personal? Were we finally seeing, as Miall would say, “evocations” and “boundary crossings”? The feeling in her voice was unmistakable. “I’ve seen so many bad marriages,” she added. “I haven’t seen a single marriage that I could imagine being in.”

I was stunned: the neurological explanation for her disavowal of romantic love, which she had so frequently put forward, was giving way to the sort of explanation that is common to literature: namely, lived experience. It’s not that autism hadn’t played a role in her decision to be celibate. But maybe it had played a role that was different from what we had been taught to believe. Maybe it had rendered the ordinary conviction of a young person who swears off marriage that much more resolute. For someone who doesn’t engage with the world abstractly, marriage only exists in the specific instances she has encountered. Marriage, we might say, is like a Great Dane. How could she have envisioned anything better?

Whether Temple knew it or not—and it wasn’t clear that she did—she was offering a different, much less rigidly deterministic account of herself. This account brought to mind other experiences that must have shaped her psychologically, such as the rampant sexism in the cattle industry. Of the period in the 1970s when there were no women working in feedlots, she has written, “Back then I didn’t know which was a greater handicap, being a woman or having autism. . . . What people call harassment today is nothing compared to what I went through.” Imagine, after a long day at work, returning to your car, as she did, and finding it adorned with bulls’ testicles.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote, “There can never be surprises in logic.” Of course, he hadn’t met Temple Grandin. From the mouth of this living proof came something even more unexpected than her criticism of marriage or vague allusions to spousal abuse: “My aunt, you know, out at the ranch—her husband was a mean drunk. God, when he got drunk he was like Jekyll & Hyde. It was horrible.” If you picture the moment in the first Alien...
movie when the creature erupts from the sleeping astronaut’s stomach, you’ll understand how shocking this seemed to me. Through the phone, my ears could see Temple shudder.

She was referring, of course, to the summer she had spent at her aunt’s ranch in Arizona when she was fifteen. It was there that her passion for cattle was born. Nowhere in print had she ever mentioned this man’s violent behavior or spoken negatively of marriage—you can’t find either in the HBO movie. If a good day back then was filled with snakes in a dark auditorium, what was a bad day like? With her amygdalae shouting, as through a bullhorn, “Fear! Fear! Fear!” it must have been terrifying to witness such outbursts. The revelation may seem run-of-the-mill by the standards of contemporary confessional culture, yet it was extraordinary for Temple—as much the revelation itself as the feeling that accompanied it.

What to make of her disclosure? According to Mar, reading can generate either “fresh emotions,” which depend “on our perception of a protagonist or character and his or her goals and mental state (i.e., emotions of sympathy, identification, empathy),” or “remembered emotions,” where “the text has produced a particular resonance with a piece of personal autobiography, so that the reader relives emotions associated with it.” Grandin was obviously experiencing the latter. While it may be tempting to label the first a sophisticated response and the second an unsophisticated one, the two often take up with each other, and, anyway, the point isn’t necessarily to give birth to more literary critics or English majors.

In a separate study of undergraduates, which used the same story by Chekhov, Djikic and Oatley found that emotion elicited during reading drove “transformation of . . . personality,” but they “stress[ed] that participants did not show a collective change in the same direction”:

Not all of them became more extraverted, or open, or conscientious, for example. In other words, they were not persuaded by a moral embedded in a story. Rather, each reader experienced a fluctuation in a unique direction in their entire personality profile. Reading Chekhov induced changes in their sense of self—perhaps temporary—such that they experienced themselves not as different in some way prescribed by the story, but as different in a direction toward discovering their own selves.

Miall, as I indicated, calls such discovery “modification,” and he understands it as “a process that may serve to reconceptualize a recognized situation”—in this case, Grandin’s decision to be celibate.
Whereas Miall stresses the importance of ambiguity as a triggering agent, Oatley and Djikic stress literature’s indirection. Miall, though, is especially sensitive to the hidden life of feeling—in all of us, not just those with alexithymia or autism or both.

Since, at any given stage of life, the self almost certainly pursues conflicting concerns, the feelings associated with these concerns will often also conflict: one feeling will reconfigure, modify, or cancel another. Possibly this process occurs continually, with little sense of its significance reaching conscious awareness. As the novelist [Georges] Bernanos puts it, “The simplest emotions are born and grow in impenetrable darkness, attracting and repelling each other like thunderclouds, in accordance with secret affinities.” For the reader a literary text provides a framework for such conflicting processes of feeling, causing them to be felt consciously and, at times, their significance realized.

However inchoately, Grandin seemed to be “experiencing herself not as different in some way prescribed by [“The Ecstatic Cry”], but as different in a direction toward discovering [her] own sel[s].”

What I like about the conclusion of the Djikic and Oatley study is just how capacious it is. The process may be general, but its direction and effects are particular. Various. And although we’re still clearly in a human-centered framework, one that presupposes normative notions of identification and transformation, there’s room for Grandin’s animal affinity and sometimes wild associations. What is more, the process appears to work immediately. Characterizing the study of first-year undergraduates, Mar writes, “It shows that reading literary art can have an effect even on non-avid-readers, that you don’t have to be a booklover for reading to transform you.”

Toward the end of our second conversation, Grandin admitted to warding off loneliness by remaining extraordinarily busy, and at one point, with a sigh, she said of romantic love, “It’s just not part of my life.” By connecting the Japanese dog to the story’s male penguin, by presenting another image of doleful waiting, she may have been trying to tell me something about herself: she had moved on. She was no longer returning each day at 4:00 to the train station. Instead of anthropomorphizing these animals, however, she had allowed them—and not the human narrator—to lead her into ambivalent self-understanding. Put another way, the squeeze machine of the short story may have provided the necessary animal frame in which this
autistic scientist could unlock her feelings—unlock her feelings and reflect, as a woman in her sixties, on her past.

Now, you might think that she had simply traded one narrative of avoid-ant attachment (autism makes romantic relationships impossible) for another (I was exposed to scary men), but the latter rendered celibacy a choice, an overdetermined one to be sure but not inevitable. It also embraced the idea of historical contingency—what we might term, with Grandin’s livestock achievements in mind, the crap chute of life—while simultaneously honoring the difference an individual can make in carving out a particular course. I still marvel at the coincidence of Grandin discovering cattle at the moment she discovered abusive men. Hers was just one path through an alternative neurology.

Finally, the latter narrative moved her closer to the “fresh emotions” of sympathy, empathy, and identification. The story doesn’t tell us why the marine biologist is so conflicted about romantic love—it just plops us down in troubled Antarctica—but with her stubborn aversion to “psycho-drama” disarmed and some of her own life experiences present in her mind, Grandin was in a much better position to infer the reason or reasons. With practice, who knows? Maybe she’d more regularly feel the wind and ice: that landscape of the self-reproaching heart. Maybe she’d even assume the “hunched posture of sorrow,” at once in imitation of the narrator and yet completely herself—though not because she is tragically single or autistic.

Or maybe she’d just stick to animals—to animals and her own form of relating to stories and people. Again, I don’t see why we have to choose between notions of respectful yet static, or disrespectful yet evolving, neurological difference. A legitimate critique of normativity should neither stand in the way of “rehabilitative” efforts nor fetishize alterity, especially when doing so can end up being just another, covert sort of pity. Better to assume that we are all changing all of the time—that each of us, whatever our neurotype and individual differences, needs some kind of rehabilitation or accommodation. Grandin can learn to be more, and we can learn to be less, conventionally emotional. She can learn to empathize with human characters, and we can learn to empathize with more than human ones—without any loss of what might be called “natural” predilection. It’s a fluid, neurocosmopolitan world, I like to say.

More than once in our conversations, Grandin remarked, “What you’re doing with literature and autistic people is really interesting,” but she con-
sidered it opposed to what the profession of literary studies was doing with literature generally. “I went to a session at a conference on empathy,” she recalled, “and it was nothing but weird rhetorical crap. There’s a certain tendency in the humanities where they dissect stories in journal jargon, and I don’t even know what they’re talking about. The thing I liked about Mr. De Simone’s class is that he explained in common sense terms what the author was trying to convey. . . . I think deconstructing literature is just rubbish.”

Who knew? Temple Grandin, conservative literary critic! If we had had more time, I would have pointed out that the “theory” she despised can lay bare the cultural biases that frame the romance-career tension as inevitably a matter of loss. This is not to say that some women don’t feel impossibly divided; rather, it’s to point out that men have not been taught to understand the bind in this way. Thom, for example, blithely manages to juggle a career in Antarctica with a wife and family. I would have also pointed out that the concept of neurodiversity—“I am different . . . not less,” Grandin has said—depends on a deep understanding of the historical impulse to pathologize people unlike ourselves. I might even have tried to show her that autistic sensing works like deconstruction. If Tito is a “Derridean of sound” for the way he preserves precategorical auditory information, then she is a “Derridean of sight” for the way she preserves precategorical visual information.

In J. M. Coetzee’s Life and Times of Michael K, the doctor complains, “There is no home left for universal souls, except perhaps in Antarctica or on the high seas.” By this logic, we must retreat nostalgically to a space of crushing naturalism, we must feel infinitesimally small and incalculably imperiled, to slough off unimportant things like race, class, gender, and national identity. Only then will we be able to recall what unites us as a species. In an age as superficially attentive to difference, which is to say as in love with social categories, as our own, autistics, I remember thinking, can teach us how to be constructively universal. We need better, tentative generalizations, which, by safeguarding detail (and thus distinction), do not march across the earth like a vanquishing army. “The human,” like “the Great Dane,” doesn’t exist; only humans and Great Danes exist, highly particular ones.

In this way, I admit to being perversely heartened by Grandin’s objection to “theory.” She still believed in the old-fashioned idea of “great” literature—in its ability to tell us something important about our lives. She still believed in a medium that demanded reflection and rewarded the instruction of a skilled teacher. (When her plane landed after our first conversation, she left a message on my phone: she’d remembered other satisfying things about
Mr. De Simone’s course.) The fact that she sounded like a generation of literary scholars long retired—or like many scientists in the academy today who are baffled by what we do in the humanities—only made her appear less stereotypically autistic. In the context of medical claims about neurological deficits, on the one hand, and the current fetish of the “posthuman,” on the other, her appeal to our common humanity seemed the sort of irony worthy of stories and poems.