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

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It’s a Sunday in March; spring has come early to Iowa. The warm temperatures and pristine skies are like a false promise: winter, conman winter, hides behind them.

My regular Skype session with Tito begins the way it always does: with a greeting—“Hi”—and a question—“How are you?” “I am fine,” he types, “but a little concerned about the shooting down of Indians.” He is referring to the murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla, a thirty-two-year-old computer engineer, in a crowded Kansas bar. Another Indian man and a white man who tried to intervene were seriously injured. Apparently mistaking the Indian men for Iranians, the attacker yelled, “Get out of my country!”

A month before, Tito seemed relatively unconcerned about our new president, Donald Trump, quipping, “He will succumb to his own expansion.” But that expansion turned lethal, and he hardly needed another reason for people to stare at or, god forbid, attack him. It’s a short walk from virulent xenophobia to brutalizing anyone who doesn’t fit some vaunted norm. Unwilling to complain, at least overtly, Tito allowed a sense of unease to puncture his customary stoicism, which made it all the more crushing.

Of what use is literature in the face of such barbarism? For one thing, it can think differently. For another, it can arrive at its ideas in a different fashion. It’s not enough to have different ideas—better ones, say, like affirmative notions of identity. They must be reached in a different way—by unicycle, let us imagine, or hang glider or even pogo stick. As I hope the chapter on Eugenie makes clear, the burgeoning field of diversity science offers a warning about categorical thinking. It’s what we humans do, it’s what we do quickly and well, but it comes at a terrible cost. The generalizing force of language—its conceptual nature—reduces experience, including the experience of encountering people different from ourselves, to a set of convenient propositions.
Racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism are thus the understandable—sadly understandable—by-products of a categorizing mind.

In his book *Playing by Ear and the Tip of the Tongue*, Reuven Tsur argues for literature, in particular poetry, as an essential corrective. “We are flooded by a ‘pandemonium’ of precategorical sensory information, day by day, moment by moment, which we categorize into a relatively small number of more easily handled categories for efficient use, which constitute ‘ordinary consciousness,’” he writes. Although made of words (which “refer to concepts, not to unique experiences”) and hence “ill-suited to convey” what it wishes to convey, literature, through its plastic approach to sound and sense, nevertheless recovers “rich precategorical information.” It “brings us nearer to the unique, individual experience, with all of the disquieting elements implied.” Literature, according to Tsur, “has something of the unpredictability, of the feeling of trembling on the brink of chaos.” In this way, both the cognitive study of literature and the cognitive study of diversity insist on individuation—individuation borne of significant bottom-up processing.

Could it be that what Temple Grandin found so interesting in Mr. De Simone’s class was, on the one hand, the engagement with precategorical sensory information and, on the other, the instruction of New Criticism, which by modeling how to move from narrow detail to holistic idea offered her a way of being abstract—*palpably* abstract? Temple’s complaint about contemporary literary studies might be understood less as an attack on professional jargon than as a plea for the appreciation of literature as a more hospitable mode of thought.

To be clear, I’m not advancing an antitheory argument—far from it. I’m simply suggesting that we rebalance our approach to literature. After nearly sixty years of critiquing it, we have perhaps lost sight (and smell and touch . . .) of its distinctiveness, which has more to do with breaking or bending categories than with denouncing things categorically. The former teaches us how to think in a new way, to outfox our own cognitive architecture; the latter reinscribes the problem. (Yes, I’m overstating things; I’m generalizing.) Both, of course, engage with politics.

Literature has more value, more utility, than many people recognize. If poetry can calm an autistic listener’s anxiety or help him to tie his shoes; if novels can help to suppress the social “noise” in everyday life through steady, detail-selective character depictions; if short stories can help to elicit and shape unreachable emotion, then it’s time to think of literature as a reasonable accommodation and, more generally, as a kind of social medicine. By
that I mean, following Jamie’s reading of Ceremony, a way of treating both
the individual and her community—a way of restoring relation. After all,
the individual can only be said to be “broken” when the community is.

If, in turn, literature can help to improve theory of mind and to promote
prosocial behavior in the nonautistic person; if it can disrupt categorizing
tendencies through sensory identification, making it more difficult to place
someone in a social out-group; if it can alter attentional habits, allowing
nonhuman entities to play a role in our planetary drama; then, again, it’s
time to think of literature as a reasonable accommodation and, more gener-
ally, as a kind of social medicine. Each group needs help to live fully in the
world.

Some part of me wants to shout: “So much for the idea that literature has
nothing to contribute to American life—nothing practical, that is.” We still
have no idea what literature can do. Like a dog, it needs to be let out of its cage
and taken for a walk. It needs to “get busy.” As anyone familiar with guide
dogs knows, that’s the phrase you use to get your dog to pee or poop. Harness
off, moving in ecstatic, olfactory circles, it has a job to do but also a wondrous
world to take in. Think of reading literature as a service dog at work and a
service dog at play.

One of the anonymous reviewers of this book, who was otherwise very
helpful, urged me “to stop picking on the frontal lobes.” At the same time,
he or she urged me to avoid making generalizations about autism. But how
to do the latter without doing the former? Wasn’t there some fundamental
tension between the natural habits of the typical brain and the nearly politi-
cal rights of details, between the need for usable knowledge and the insis-
tence on particularity? The advice seemed a bit like the mischievous wisdom
of Mark Twain: “Good judgment is the result of experience and experience
the result of bad judgment.” Then again, if anyone should appreciate such
wisdom it is an English professor. As the Danish physicist Niels Bohr once
remarked, “How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have
some hope of making progress.”

As I stated in the introduction, there’s no literature—no linguistic catego-
ries to bend—without the frontal lobes. I simply offer a corrective: general-
izations arrived at much more slowly and tentatively through the singular
(though by no means single) example, as in novels and, yes, autism. Think of
the chapters in this book as halfway between the kind of hyperfocusing that
Tito talks about and the photographs that his mother takes to help him
understand what he has seen—to understand it from a more neurotypical

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perspective. (The camera operates like ordinary language, received wisdom.) Think of patient, humble ethnography as an autistic version of science. Qualitative particularity matters. We may not be able to extrapolate from it easily—“Autistics make wonderful readers of literature”—but nor can we just dismiss it by clinging to the standard, deficit-based generalization: “Autistics can’t do literature.” I’m with Marcel Proust when he says, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” New eyes, you might say, for difference, for possibility.

In six weeks, my son, DJ, will graduate from Oberlin College with a degree in anthropology and creative writing—he has a 3.9 GPA. He lives in the dorm with an aide—my wife lives in town and helps him to coordinate his support services. Soon they will both come back to Iowa. Tito continues with his routine in Austin, Texas—he spends time at an adult daycare facility and at a construction site while his mother works; at night and on the weekends they read literature and philosophy. He’s presently finishing a new book, his sixth, on autistic perception. Jamie remains in Syracuse, New York; he keeps busy with numerous activities, including advocacy work and art making, but he’d like a satisfying job. Dora just won a National Science Foundation grant as the principal investigator; she was recently promoted at Portland State University from research associate to assistant research professor. Eugenie continues to raise her children, to dance, and to coach competitive skaters—if I learned anything from her, it’s that my mind needs to move as fluidly as her mind and body do. Temple is traveling and lecturing as much as she always has.

So much diversity in neurodiversity. So much promise waiting to be fulfilled. And yet so many threats as well. It’s as if, in Trump, the category as belligerent force has returned. Some commentators called his election victory “whitelash”—it certainly felt like a social car accident (my neck hasn’t quite recovered)—but I think of it a bit differently. The billionaire Tom Sawyer has talked his friends into whitewashing Aunt Polly’s fence, his penalty for skipping school. They’ve offered him their small treasures for the privilege of doing this work. Yet the fence has gotten bigger—they may never finish. They may have to fork over more treasures.

Even Robert Frost, no paragon of liberal politics, understood the problem with walls: “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense.” Offense, of course, is the point. In addition to the current immigration fiasco, we’re looking at a budget that, among other things, cuts funding for medical research and
eliminates the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. What is more, Trump’s Supreme Court pick, Neil Gorsuch, authored a decision affirming a less than rigorous education for those with disabilities—the case involved an autistic student. And recently, Betsy DeVos, the secretary of education, cited historically black colleges as an example of school choice. As if the segregation and discrimination that engendered them were a boon! (I suppose if Ben Carson, the secretary of housing and urban development, can refer to slaves as “immigrants,” then DeVos can refer to undercutting public education as saving poor children.)

How to protect the recent gains of the neurodiversity movement? How, in this climate, to extend them? “You must blow against the walls of every power that exists the small trumpet of your defiance,” exclaimed Norman Mailer. But on that small trumpet you must also play a tune of joy. Beyond what I learned about these novels, beyond what I learned about autism (and my own neurotypicality), beyond the claims I might make about the value of literature, there was the simple joy of reading a book and discussing it with another equally invested reader.

Jane Austen once remarked—she could have been talking about someone like Trump—“The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.” Writing in a different time and in a different context, Azar Nafisi, an Iranian professor who secretly discussed Nabokov’s Lolita, among other novels, with her female university students, insisted on pleasure: whatever the ancillary benefits of literature, they flow from the way it engages our senses. “We read,” she said, “for the pure, sensual, and unadulterated pleasure of reading. . . . Our reward is the discovery of the many hidden layers within these works that do not merely reflect reality but reveal a spectrum of truths, thus intrinsically going against the grain of totalitarian mindsets.” A spectrum of truths indeed, but one stretched and amplified, in the case of this book, by a spectrum of readerly minds.