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IS THE AU IN AUTISM THE AU IN AUTONOMY?

Some readers, particularly those of a certain vintage, may detect in my title the echo of a well-known article by Kwame Appiah that appeared in the 1991 volume of *Critical Inquiry*: "Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonialism."¹ In that piece, Appiah partly discovers and partly constructs a braided aesthetic genealogy whose implicit answer to the question prompting it can only be yes...and no. Both the post in postmodernism and the post in postcolonialism signal what Appiah deems space clearing gestures, strategies of self-assertion and self-distinction, in the guise of temporal or historical demarcations.² And the respective caesuras that both of these concepts institute would seem to be aligned and allied in their rejection of the claim that western rationality makes to "an exclusivity of insight" under the seal of modernism/modernity, the presumptive telos of optimal cultural "development."³ Owing, however, to the structural dependence of a specifically postcolonial aesthetic movement upon a global marketplace structured according to that same rationality, its largely comprador exponents find their signature difference (from colonialism, indigeneity etc.) via a circuitous rapprochement with modernism, albeit along its left flank. In somewhat displaced terms, I am tracing a like, if obverse, logic with respect to the supreme value attached to the normative development of autonomous subjectivity, on one side, and on the other, a heterogeneous condition, autism, long understood (for roughly the first sixty years of its diagnostic currency), to be the unsocializable Other of subjectivity as such.

Autism sprang into intelligible being—first as an orphan pathology, then as a virtual epidemic, now as a minority population—from the same discursive and cultural matrix that had, in the preceding decades, spelled the slow obsolescence of the robust model of liberal subjectivity: i.e. strongly bounded, autonomous, self-interested and self-determining, decidedly masculine, not to say masculinist.

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post in Postmodernism, the Post in Postcolonialism." *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Winter 1991), 336-357.

² Ibid., 342.

³ Ibid.

That matrix, of course, was (and is) the regime of biopolitics, wherein the translation of disregarded oddity, eccentricity and iconoclasm into categories of carefully monitored maladjustment, such as autism, was a contributing factor in the broader project of a social management sufficiently pervasive as to undermine if not dispel the mythos of individual sovereignty. In its articulation of personal discipline and collective "regularity," as Foucault has it, the reign of the norm simultaneously: a) endeavors to preclude any positive departure from the social framework, any truly sanctified exceptionality; and b) facilitates the proliferation of negative departures or "deviancies" within that framework—from neurasthenics to homosexuals to "idiots" to juvenile delinquents, all of whom are, in Giorgio Agamben's signature conceit, included *as excluded*, made to belong *as exceptions*.⁴ Given that the regime of biopower takes as a primary concern the intersections where bodily and sociocultural reproduction meet, it should not come as a surprise that this two-pronged agenda should have operated with particular saliency in the area of child development. Regarding the late nineteenth/early twentieth century impetus toward a more fully administered, seamlessly integrated selfhood—with a corresponding depreciation of personal autonomy—Doug Mao remarks in his book *Fateful Beauty*, "if the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century could be called the Age of the Child Managed, it could with equal justice be called the Age of the Child Studied."⁵ As he proceeds to elaborate, the child was intensively studied precisely so that he could be the more comprehensively managed: "the capacity of any event to shape the soul is crucially assumed, and...what follows from this assumption is an exhortation to careful watching."⁶ Instructional materials urged parents to observe, study, inspect and supervise their children with a specific eye to weeding out those elements—peers, activities, etc.—that would divert them from the path of strictly normal physical and social growth. "Learn to Observe Children," "Study the Neighborhood Children," and "Visit the Playground" read several of the headings in the influential *Outline of Child Study*.⁷ In this fashion, what Mao calls the "Rousseauistic desideratum of free development"⁸ recedes entirely before a will to control the constituting environment of the child and thus to assure her assimilation to the prevailing mandates of self-governance.

According to Foucault, the chief institution monitoring divarications from the social norm during this period was psychiatry, whose initial conception of aberrancy applied specifically (Foucault says exclusively) to children, especially "recalcitrant children," and was gauged by reference to an approved course of development. The child managed and studied thus became the basis for the refinement and multiplication of pathologized classes and subdivisions whereby normativity was enforced *via negativa*: the previously catch-all condition of madness was subject to thoroughgoing inspection and recalibration, resulting in

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 7.

⁵ Douglas Mao, *Fateful Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008), 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

a series of new classifications, gradations, and specifications, with a decidedly juvenile or developmental bias: idiocy, imbecility, degeneracy etc.-- disorders grouped, when affecting adults, under the category of "infantilism."⁹

As Majia Nadesan has demonstrated, in the works of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, the coinage of autism represented a late stage of the same process. Growing out of an increasingly nuanced understanding of childhood pathology at the fin-de-siecle, "the identification and exploration of autism," she remarks, "was dependent upon the emergence of an early 20th century model of the medical subject that centered on childhood," now apprehended as a "separate stage of life" that demanded its own normalization.¹⁰ In an effort to "properly socialize children" and "engineer the conditions" of their development, new campaigns of "mental hygiene" and "child guidance" extended "social surveillance over more aspects of the private life of children" and produced "ever more nuanced measures of mental health."¹¹ Inklings of developmental deviancy were no sooner born than they metastasized, to the effect of consolidating juvenile norms of aptitude, performance and behavior all the more securely. The combination of the child managed and the child studied not only acted to expand the definition of delinquency but to include "pre-delinquent" behaviors and states of being and to multiply the divisions among them, separating out psychosis from a catch-all idiocy, feeble-mindedness from psychosis, and autism from feeble-mindedness. The shaping force that biopolitical normalization exerted over the medical attitudes at work in the discovery of autism find simple, but eloquent testimony in the words of Hans Asperger: "The normal child, especially the young one, who stands in a proper relation to the environment, instinctively swims with the tide. Conscious judgment does not come into this."¹² Striking in itself, the over-determined diction of conformity in this passage ("normal," "proper relation") is naturalized ("instinctively") before culminating in the conformist diction of cliché ("swims with the tide"). Still more striking, however, is that for Asperger, as for Leo Kanner, the abnormality of autism is not only inborn but generalized, a failure of the instinct of normality itself ("to swim with the tide") – which is to say, it is not construed as an aberrancy concerning this or that feature of social life, but an aberrancy concerning all such features, concerning sociality itself, an abnormality in the child's very disposition to be normal.

Looking back at biopower's two-pronged agenda – to preclude valorized departures from the social network and to proliferate pathologized deviations within the social framework (the included exclusion) – Asperger's commentary begins to disclose the genealogical twist in the account I am offering, its analogy to the "post" analysis of Appiah. From its inception, autism bore the singular property of being construed as a negative or pathological deviation from the

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*. (NY: Picador, 2006), 201-223.

¹⁰ Majia Nadesan, *Constructing Autism: Unveiling the 'Truth' and Understanding the Social* (London: Routledge, 2005), 53, 67, 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67-8.

¹² Hans Asperger, "Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood." Trans. Uta Frith in Uta Frith (ed.), *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 74.

socio-symbolic arena as such, a disorder, that is, of self-exclusion, which could not apparently be reversed. Even before the discovery of the syndrome itself, psychologist Eugene Bleuer applied the term autistic to schizophrenics in order to describe [their] “tendency to withdraw from the world, a consequence of a ‘delirious break with reality.’”¹³ Kanner proceeded to define the condition he co-discovered primarily in terms of self-sequestration. He used the label autism, in fact, not just to refer to his 11 case studies, who in aggregate exhibited a wide array of symptomatic behaviors, but also, quite regularly, to the specific trait of social withdrawal. His famous phrase, “extreme autistic aloneness” signifies not just a so-called “core deficit” of the condition, but *the core*, the autism of autism, the very essence of the thing.¹⁴ The “social first” deficit model he thereby introduced has continued to dominate the nosology of autism until very recently. As late as 2009, noted “psy” historian Ian Hacking could flatly declare, “Autistic people have a great deal of difficulty sharing any form of life with the neurotypical community.”¹⁵ He doubtless felt confident in invoking the one, the only, precept that had proximally united the various disciplinary takes on autism (psychiatric, genetic, neuropsychological, cognitive, pediatric, educational), anchoring even those schema, like the “spectrum” or the “triad,” that seemed to displace it.

Now on the one hand, we can readily discern how this model of autism would jibe ideologically with the superannuation, under biopower, of the classical ideal of liberal subjectivity, serving as a cracked mirror of its once cherished attributes. As Joseph Strauss observes, “autism might be understood as a pathological excess of what the Western world most prizes—autonomous individuality—refigured as what it most fears—painful solitude, isolation and loss of community.”¹⁶ Or, if I might take the liberty of translating Strauss’ affective positivism into an historicist framework, autism has been fashioned and then repeatedly interpreted as a form of “excessive individuality, autonomy and self-reliance” that reflected, as in a glass darkly, the pathological potential of those same high liberal values when judged by the biopolitical standard of a fully administered selfhood, for which any failure of normative accord with “community” governance would indeed register as “painful isolation” or exile. In this purely negative sense, then, the “au” in autism has from its inception approximated the “au” in autonomy.

On the other hand, however, precisely in ceding the existence of a sustainable subpopulation defined by its refusal or rather its *pre-fusal* of the Symbolic order—its default not just on social norms, like those other categories of deviance, but on the norm of sociality as such—the “extreme aloneness” diagnostic opens up the possibility of a more affirmative rapprochement between the received profiles of autistic and autonomous subjectivity, i.e.

¹³ Nadesan, 39-40.

¹⁴ Leo Kanner, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” in A.N. Donnellan (ed.), *Classic Readings in Autism*. (NY: Teacher’s College, 1943-1985), 41.

¹⁵ Ian Hacking, “Humans, Aliens and Autism.” *Dedalus* (Summer 2009), 51.

¹⁶ Joseph Strauss, “Autism as Culture” in Leonard Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd edition (NY: Routledge, 2006), 536.

between their respective places in the cultural imaginary. Such a possibility has only come to fruition recently, as the testimonial writings of self-identified autistics have challenged and downgraded but neither exploded nor abandoned Kanner's "social first" theory and its various correlates (Theory of Mind, empathic deficit, simulation defect, etc.).¹⁷ On the long view of history, we are here confronted with a strange but perfectly logical double irony. As the profoundly biopolitical social deficit paradigm of autism comes under increasing pressure from the self-representational advocacy of those it has marginalized, the terms of its continued existence, however qualified, are what lends the emerging profile of autism, advanced by those same "insiders," the means to revivify and gain a certain legitimacy from the sovereign individualism that biopolitics itself has worked to undermine. It is in the shadows of a clinically verified asociality that autistic memoirs and autobiographies in particular enjoy some purchase on the classic liberal mode of subjectivity as an empowering vehicle of disabled identification.

This complex, uncanny dynamic plays itself out in the most pertinent modes of developmental literature, the well-established genre of *bildungsroman* and the burgeoning canon of autistic writing—which, considering the premium the latter has placed on disabled self-cultivation might reasonably be annexed to the *bildungsroman* tradition. The *bildungsroman* had its birth in the Enlightenment era, and the intellectual and spiritual self-fashioning presented in its earliest versions—from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*—modeled that episteme's investment in the growth of a sovereign autonomous subjectivity. But as several noted scholars of the *bildungsroman* have remarked (Franco Moretti, Jed Esty, Gregory Castle, Doug Mao), precisely because the *bildungsheld* (the hero of the genre) was to serve as a metaphor of subject formation per se, the original form and impetus of the genre could not survive unscathed the sociopolitical changes of the nineteenth century. Moretti contends that the "objective culture [of the Victorian era] no longer helps to construct individual subjects but wounds and disintegrates them,"¹⁸ a dire judgment upon which Doug Mao gives a rather more pragmatic gloss: "When development became a matter of continuous shaping by the totality of one's surroundings...the traditional *bildungsroman*, with its dependence on crisis, example, reflection and socialization, could hardly have seemed adequate to this understanding of growth."¹⁹ Indeed, as Gregory Castle apprises us, it was the *bildungsroman* form itself that grew pragmatic under these normative pressures, morphing from "a genre concerned with spiritual development ...to one

¹⁷ For Theory of Mind and empathic deficits, see Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness*. (Cambridge: MIT, 1995); Uta Frith and Francesca Happé, "Theory of Mind and Self Consciousness: What Is It Like to Be Autistic." *Mind and Language* 14.1 (1991), 1-22. For simulation deficit, see L. Oberman and V. Ramachandran, "The Simulating Social Mind." *Psychological Bulletin* 33.2 (2007), 310-327; V. Ramachandran and L. Oberman, "Broken Mirrors." *Scientific American* 295.5 (2002), 63-69.

¹⁸ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. (London: Verso, 2000), 227-8.

¹⁹ Douglas Mao, 96-7.

concerned with the pragmatics of socialization.”²⁰ Whereas classical *bildungsroman* effected “a bracketing off of external forces in order to guarantee the sovereignty, autonomy and harmony of [the] inner culture” of the individual, the (post) Victorian *bildungsroman*, responding to the more bureaucratized strictures of biopower, set about “rewarding those whose desires for self-development are identical to the demands of the social system.”²¹ In this variant on the genre, Castle writes, “the *bildungsheld* is compelled to submit to a state-sponsored regime of socialization,” an iron-clad Althusserian interpolation. The “grim inevitability of this formulation,” he continues, “can only be overcome by an imminent critique [of a type all the great modernist *bildungsromane* attempted] that surrenders...the belief in sovereign bourgeois subjectivity,” forswears autonomy as a fantasy, and insists upon a skeptical reconceptualization of the narratable agent.²²

This mutation in the later *bildungsroman* speaks to its realist ambitions: that is, its proposal to engage, if not directly tally with, to index if not fully encapsulate the shifting conditions at work in the society whence it sprung. It is in the first instance a modification in the *metaphorical* value of the *bildungsheld* or hero. As Jed Esty has observed, from its beginnings, “the nation was the proper cultural container for the *bildungsroman*’s allegory of development.”²³ As such, the sort of subjectivity a given *bildungsheld* is called upon to represent, will figure forth, as a part of the generic contract, the polis of which she is designated a citizen, and any shift toward a more biopolitically canalized and constrained enterprise of individual development will reflect and be read as reflecting the altered lineaments of the larger community. A more pragmatically oriented *bildungsheld* or course of *bildung* bespeaks and indeed metaphorizes a more powerful and pervasive regime of governmentality. The *necessity* for this alteration, however, lies in the *metonymical* dimension. It is the hero’s participation, from childhood, in the social institutions shaping her (familial, educational, occupational, legal, cultural) that shape the course of maturation; it is her constitutive encounter with biopolitically charged social mandates, her subjection to norms fostered, circulated and enforced in increasingly public ways, that exposes the residual aspiration to individual autonomy as an “empty dream” and abides the confinement of even vigorous resistance within the sphere of disciplinary regulation.

Now the heroes of that extension of the *bildungsroman* tradition known as the auto-biography do not shoulder the same allegorical burdens, either in the metaphorical or the metonymic sense, and as we shall see the unencumbered state they enjoy or incur lends them the aura of self-directedness or “inner culture” associated with the traditional high liberal *bildungsheld*. To begin with, the representational office of these auto-biographers is typically far different and more limited than the latter day protagonists of “development.” If they might be

²⁰ Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*. (Gainesville: U. Florida, 2006), 8.

²¹ Ibid., 15, 39.

²² Ibid., 15

²³ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism and the Fiction of Development*. (NY: Oxford, 2012), 6.

taken to personify or stand in for any collective, it is one—the autistic community—that does not cohere around any relatively uniform ensemble of norms, nor any universally shared attributes, outside of a highly variable departure from neurotypical modes of thought, conduct, self-presentation and interpersonal adherence. Their circumscribed metaphorical scope, in turn, arises from what we might call their affiliative (hence metonymic) difference. They do not enact, in or from childhood, the same type or degree of participation in the dominant institutions of acculturation as the “pragmatic” *bildungsheld*; they do not pay the same kind or degree of heed to the authority reposed in such institutions and the figures who superintend them; and they do not labor under the same expectations of properly citational performance of (normative) self-cultivation.

Almost to a person, the authors of the memoirs in question attribute these dis/alternative engagements to a symptomatic social withdrawal, which a number of the titles trope as species-difference: Jasmine O’Neill’s *Through the Eyes of Aliens*, Jean Miller’s *Women From Another Planet*, Dawn Prince-Hughes’ *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*, Erika Hammerschmidt’s *Born on the Wrong Planet* and Naoki Higashida’s Short Story, “Earthling and Autism.”²⁴ This motif of “another world” is a formula for objectifying the subsistence within dominant culture of a separate inner autistic world, what O’Neill calls “the closed, wee, bubble of an autistic person’s consciousness.”²⁵ Prolific and well-known autobiographer, Donna Williams, structured the narrative of her first volume, *Nobody Nowhere*, around the treacherous gap between two planets (“my world” and “the(ir) world”) that nonetheless remain inter-nested with one another, and it is precisely this simultaneous sense of distance and intrusion that the visiting “alien” metaphor looks to convey.²⁶ If the “autistic person alone” is a myth, as facilitated communication guru Douglas Biklen avers,²⁷ a myth not only challenged but exposed by prosthetic technological intervention, it is nonetheless a myth provisionally embraced by most autistic self-portraitists. All of the texts cited here confess a certain default on social normalcy/normative sociality as a defining trait of the autistic identity they express: Erika Hammerschmidt kicks off her memoir by defining autism as “the condition of being by oneself, being alone.”²⁸ Jasmine O’Neill proclaims autism “a condition of a certain form of isolation...of self-absorption,” which she likens to being “locked inside oneself, an island,” and “going right along with the characteristic withdrawal and keen self-absorption, is a closed personality.” Seeming “unaware of others,” she

²⁴ Jasmine O’Neil, *Through the Eyes of Aliens: A Book About Autistic People*. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999); Jean Miller, *Women From Another Planet: Our Lives in the Universe of Autism* (Bloomington: 1st Books, 2003); Dawn Prince-Hughes, *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism*. (NY: Three Rivers, 2004); Erika Hammerschmidt, *Born on the Wrong Planet*. (Shawnee Mansion: APC, 2008); Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen Year Old boy with Autism* (NY: Random House, 2007), 46.

²⁵ Jasmine O’Neill, 17. Aptly, the phrase introduces a chapter devoted to autism as a separate sphere, entitled “The Autistic World.”

²⁶ Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere* (London: Jessica Kinglsey, 1992), 15, 53, 124. She refers to her world as “my little insular world.”

²⁷ Douglas Biklen, *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (NY: NYU Press, 2005), 34-51.

²⁸ Erika Hammerschmidt, 1, 89.

proceeds to observe, autists “appear as Martians who don’t know the culture of the planet they have been misplaced upon.”²⁹

In identifying autism with self-seclusion, many of these auto-biographers, draw upon and concur with what has come to be known as the “medical model” of autistic spectrum disorder, rather than the neurodiversity counter discourse. Hammerschmidt, for example, specifically references Kanner and Asperger in announcing her definition of autism; O’Neill cites Kanner’s famous phrase, “autistic aloneness,” in fleshing out her Martian metaphor; and Temple Grandin has Bernard Rimland, one of the foremost “autism doctors” of the cognitive school, pen the Preface to her *bildung*-memoir, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*.³⁰

At the same time, however, autistic life writers positively dissent from the medical model in refusing to regard such habitual aloneness as either a primary trait/symptom of autism or as a fundamental deficiency appurtenant to the condition. Instead they view their asocial tendencies or profiles as a) a function of sensory disorder, as outlined by the autistic poet Tito Mukhopadhyay in *How Can I Talk When My Lips Don’t Move*; and the young teen Naoki Higashida in *The Reason I Jump*);³¹ b) an epiphenomena of chronic anxiety, as mooted in Prince-Hughes *Songs of the Gorilla Nation*);³² c) an effect of bodily disregulation, as portrayed in *Carly’s Voice*;³³ d) an inexplicable childhood disposition, as autistic savant Daniel Tammett tell us in *Born on a Blue Day*);³⁴ or even e) a matter of personal preference, as explained in Hammerschmidt’s *Born on the Wrong Planet*, Gunilla Gerland’s *A Real Person*, and, most explicitly, by O’Neill: “In autism, there’s isolation. It’s not a bad thing. A withdrawn personality isn’t a terrible thing that needs to be changed. Some people like being withdrawn and rather isolated. So autistic people prefer being alone and rather secluded.”³⁵ O’Neill tacitly locates this desire for habitual solitude along a “spectrum” that includes neurotypical subjects. From this “inside” perspective, “extreme autistic aloneness” appears not as a constitutional and thus irrevocable adversity, but as a challenge to be mitigated, overcome or simply embraced within the narrative itself. Indeed, the trajectory of *bildung* in the auto-biography typically pivots on some epiphanic negotiation of that gap—in Donna Williams’ words—between “my world” and “the world.”

But precisely because this variable coming together of self and world or self and others needs to be accomplished deliberately, distinctly and at a specific moment

²⁹ Jasmine O’Neill, 11, 53.

³⁰ Erika Hammerschmidt, 1; Jasmine O’Neil, 53; Temple Grandin, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*. (NY: Arena, 1986), 1-4.

³¹ Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, *How Can I Talk When My Lips Don’t Move: Inside My Autistic Mind*. (NY: Arcade, 2008), 105-9, 139-142; Naoki Higashida, 21-2, 27-9.

³² Dawn Prince-Hughes, 43-6, 63-70.

³³ Arthur and Carly Fleischman, *Carly’s Voice: Breaking Through Autism* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 134-44, 368.

³⁴ Daniel Tammet, *Born on a Blue Day*. (NY: Free Press, 2006), 20-8, 73-85.

³⁵ Erika Hammerschmidt, 112; Gunilla Gerland, *A Real Person*. (London: Souvenir Press, 1996), 17-23; Jasmine O’Neil, 46.

in time, it cannot be said to follow any ordinary course of (post) Victorian socialization, wherein the cumulative weight of environmental influence might be conceived as progressively contouring the character of the protagonist. The transformative moments of auti-life narrative—Temple Grandin discovers and passes through her “door”; Carly Fleischman types “HELP TEETH HURT”; Dawn Prince-Hughes joins gorilla nation; Tito Mukhopadhyay learns to write³⁶—factor as exercises of autonomous individuality, decisions taken in an almost contractarian manner. The autistic ultimately elects to buy into the social order “on her terms,” a phrase Donna Williams repeats so often it becomes a narrative leitmotif in *Nobody Nowhere*. On the one hand, the social conversion narrative of the autistic finds confirmation in the act of public narration itself, a supremely social gesture intensified by the intimacy these auti-biographers stage with their readership. On the other hand, the practice of life writing, by generic definition, casts this sort of social conversion as a profoundly self-authored development.

Although the claim to self-sovereignty forcibly lodged in these autistic life-writings remains a fantasy, as all such claims must, it proves not just an enabling but a near-warranted fantasy, hence one that the autistic subject is equipped as well as eager to sustain. Whereas the *bildungsheld* and the late modern subjectivity he represents, undertakes self-cultivation *within* and *by way of* the social sphere, the autistic protagonists undertake self-cultivation as a movement *towards* or a path *into* the social sphere. By their own account, their originary failure to observe biopolitical norms, the very mark of their disability, is at another level, their comparative freedom from those norms, at least as pertains to the *bildung* they narrate. That is, their represented disregard for social norms bears a kind of “minority” license, taking hold as it does in early childhood, when the subject is most intensively socialized yet held least accountable. Not unlike the psychiatric community from Kanner and Asperger to Uta Frith and Simon Baron-Cohen, these auto-memoirists characteristically treat their childhood as transpiring outside the Symbolic order, into which the narrative itself will over time carry them. A number even report having cultivated in childhood “a language of my own” (Williams),³⁷ and Jasmine O’Neill goes so far as to proclaim “All autistics have their own understanding of language that is private to them.”³⁸ *Not an infantilizing pre-Symbolic then, but an alt/aut Symbolic.* For cognitive and neuropsychologists, the autistic detachment from a shared circuit of communication is the insignia of a defective thinness of character. But for these same writers, that detachment forms a sort of developmental preserve, where what they take to be their native personality was nurtured and consolidated outside the demand for normal behavior and over against the pathologizing labels that their abnormality incurred. What Bruno Bettelheim deemed an “empty fortress”³⁹—the autistic child unresponsive to interpersonal prompts—turns out, from this autistic perspective, more of a fortress of solitude,

³⁶ Temple Grandin, *Emergence*, 83-89; Arthur and Carly Fleischman, 111-120; Dawn Prince-Hughes, 88-100; Tito Mukhopadhyay, 157-165.

³⁷ Donna Williams, 33.

³⁸ Jasmine O’Neill, 53.

³⁹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. (Toronto: Collier MacMillan, 1967).

the incubator of a subjectivity that seems to precede its symbolic determinations and so gives rise to an effective mythos of self-creation. Dawn Prince-Hughes captures this distinctively autistic temporality of *bildung*: "We individuals, with our cultures of one, are building a culture of many."⁴⁰

At the heart of two of the better known autistic memoirs lies a phenomenological device, of the protagonist's own fabrication, that functions as an emblem of just this "aut/alt" temporality. Tito Mukhopadhyay bookends his *How Can I Talk if My Lips Don't Move* with an autistic *stade du miroir*, whose difference from its more famous Lacanian counterpart is telling. In the Lacanian mirror stage, the infant anticipates a fully coordinated body-ego in her reflected image as it has been triangulated by an approving adult presence. In sum, she assumes a selfhood already filtered by a social Other, even prior to entry into the Symbolic.⁴¹ By contrast, Tito regards his mirror as an already if alternative Symbolic portal, a site of narrative transaction in which Tito projects his imaginings in order to receive them back as his experience of the world. His narrative begins:

I would stand in front of the mirror, not to admire the landscape, in its reflection. I would stand in front of it because I believed that the mirror wanted to tell me a story. I believed that the mirror wanted to tell me a story because I wanted to tell *it* a story. I would tell my story to the mirror and the mirror would tell me back the story.⁴²

By the end of the autobiography, "the world of stories that appear to be forming behind the mirror" reflect the "eyes and ears" of Tito, who with typically autistic echoalia repeats them back again.⁴³ In a final poetic figuration of his autistic mode of address, Tito positions himself on both sides of his existential mirror.

I am he
And I am me.
I am he behind that mirror
I am me watching the he
I am what.
I am what it is to be.⁴⁴

Tito's words envelop his primal scene of social transaction, the diegetic mirror/portal, between the fort and the da of his identity, thus ensuring that his mandated "social adaptation," as he calls it, will unfold in accord with his own dialogical vision, which defines "what it is to be"—the ultimate assertion of autonomy.

⁴⁰ Dawn Prince-Hughes, 40.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function," in *Ecrits*. (NY: Norton, 2006), 76.

⁴² Tito Mukhopadhyay, 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 217.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The narrative of Temple Grandin's *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*, the ur-text of the niche genre of auto-biography, appears to proceed from extinction to education to self-invention (from a near fatal car accident precipitated by her panicked acting out, to her subjection to social, academic and occupational forms of discipline, to her "emergence" as a professionally successful, crankily iconoclastic animal expert and celebrity native informant on all things autistic). But her signature phenomenological-cum-therapeutic device reverses this current, giving retroactive precedence to self-invention over socialization as a stay *against* personal extinction. That device of course is Grandin's much ballyhooed "squeeze machine." Modeled on a cattle chute, but crafted and adapted across several versions by Grandin herself, the squeeze machine works to enable her to feel emotion, relieve sensory overstimulation, experience a sense of intimacy with others, find relief from her circumscribed obsessions, relinquish control and, in thus abandoning herself, to become a real person. All of this proto-social responsiveness, however, unfolds as a direct effect of the deliberate, proactive agency and control she exercises in conceiving, designing, building and endlessly refining her machine. Not unlike Tito's mirror, Temple's squeeze machine both figures and vehiculates an ultimately self-reflexive dialectic.

However, the squeeze machine, unlike Tito's mirror, is more than an emblem, or even a self-styled instrument of socialization. The squeeze machine also functions as a weapon in her campaign to enter the Symbolic order "on her own terms." Much of *Emergence* retails her dispute with professionals, medical and educational, who adjudge the squeeze machine to be sick or aberrant. A contest transpires, in effect, as to who or what should be in charge of Temple's socialization: the experts to whom even Temple's primary and sympathetic social Other, her long-suffering mom, pays heed, or an artifice of Temple's own creation, the squeeze machine, which answered and allayed, albeit in a different order of priority, all of the main symptoms that the experts themselves came to enumerate. The ultimate success of Grandin's machine, both in her own life and, through her writings, in the popular imagination, sets the pattern for her career as a native informant, a self-proclaimed "anthropologist from Mars."⁴⁵ Sidonie Smith has commented that Grandin "constitutes a self out of polarization, an argumentative self that is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the bourgeois subject."⁴⁶ It would be more accurate to say, however, that in a series of books following *Emergence* (*Thinking in Pictures*, *Animals in Translation*, *The Autistic Brain*), Grandin ratifies her initial assumption of an already constituted self by incorporating, inflecting and polemically reinterpreting the existing psychological and neuroscientific opinion on autism. That is to say, Grandin does not become a personification of bourgeois individuality and autonomy by surpassing or recovering from her autism, as Smith contends, but by elaborating dialectically upon it. Far from "thwart[ing] all efforts to conform to modernist notions of a unified, autonomous and free self" (Smith again),⁴⁷ "autistic obdurate silences" provide the framework—what Žižek might call the Cartesian

⁴⁵ Oliver Sachs, *An Anthropologist on Mars*. (NY: Knopf, 1996), 259.

⁴⁶ Sidonie Smith, "Take it to the Limit One More Time" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.) *Getting a Life*. (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1996), 241.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 233.

void—in which such a self takes hold, precisely in the absence of any serious “efforts to conform.”

As a mark of “extreme autistic aloneness,” those obdurate silences exercise another function as well in the constitution of autistic subjectivity along liberal, bourgeois lines. As the critiques of Judith Butler’s original theory of *Gender Trouble*, including my own, correctly insisted, a performative effect, like the performance whence it derives, cannot be properly evaluated without taking an audience into account.⁴⁸ The audience interpellated by the memoirs discussed here would be mainly composed of neurotypicals for whom autism, particularly juvenile autism, is something of a black box phenomenon, a mystery identified with silence and isolation, and frequently assigned tropes of profound enclosure: a fortress, a prison, a bubble. Ian Hacking speaks for the audience these texts imagine when he states that neurotypicals cannot tell what or even if autistics are thinking.⁴⁹ What many of these memoirs also count upon, however, is that their audience identifies the black box phenomenon of obdurate silence with an irrefragable guilelessness, bare life as bare truth. One of the oldest stereotypes of autism, and one periodically recirculated in popular culture, is that autistics cannot lie—a supposition that I can assure you from personal experience with my son is, well, a hoot. Without affirming the myth, the cited memoirists trade upon the image of autistic honesty in a number of ways. Daniel Tammet reports being unable to understand the story “Stone Soup” as a child “because I had no concept of deception.”⁵⁰ Jasmine O’Neill claims “Autistics have no delusions...they make truthful observations”;⁵¹ Erika Hammerschmidt declares, “Autistic children usually have no desire to be dishonest,” “we possess the quality of directness and avoid ... mind games,” and “Autistic people are honest to the point of social unacceptability and some autistics are actually incapable of lying.”⁵² Temple Grandin even proclaims that as an autistic, “I have no unconscious,” a self-description belied by her positive inability to grasp the sexual implications of her squeeze machine.⁵³

Finally, to one degree or another, all of these writers weigh in on the legendary mutual misunderstanding of autistics and neurotypicals by deploying a reverse discourse that runs as follows: autistics have so much difficulty understanding neurotypicals because of their penchant for verbal feints, indirection, euphemism, and polite dishonesty; conversely, neurotypicals would seem to have trouble fathoming autistic being in the world, because it comes without symbolic elaboration which, as Lacan theorizes, exists primarily to screen the Real. According to autism scholar, Stuart Murray, neurotypicals have been disconcerted from the beginning by what he calls the “autistic presence.”⁵⁴ Thus,

⁴⁸ Joseph Valente and Molly Rothenberg, “Performative Chic: The Fantasy of a Performative Politics.” *College Literature* 24.1 (1997), 295-306.

⁴⁹ Ian Hacking, 55.

⁵⁰ Daniel Tammet, 52.

⁵¹ Jasmine O’Neill, 120.

⁵² Erika Hammerschmidt, 3, 163, 172.

⁵³ Temple Grandin, *Animals in Translation*. (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 92.

⁵⁴ Stuart Murray, *Autism*. (NY: Routledge, 2012), 105-7.

Leo Kanner says of one of his charges, "He is just there";⁵⁵ Hans Asperger exclaimed, "The autist is only himself."⁵⁶ In either case, there lurks a mysterious aura in the Benjaminian sense of absolutely unvarnished being.

It is this "only himself," in turn, that accounts for the autistic's apparent, comparative immunity to the ruses of biocultural socialization. Lacking the constitutive neurotypical investment in symbolic substitution and misdirection, autistics characteristically display passionate and inflexible attachments to an exceedingly narrow range of interest, a symptomatology attested in memoirs, such as Nazir's *Send in the Idiots* and Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day*.⁵⁷ But by the same token, these autistics prove less liable to having their desires molded in advance to suit the standards of normativity and the needs of the social system at large—to having, as Nicholas Rose describes modern subjectivity, their "selves constituted as a possible object for rational management," invented as "manipulable, coded... and calculable,"⁵⁸ like the heroes in the pragmatic variants of the *bildungsroman*. Under the conditions of a consumeristic, biopolitical modernity, autonomy entails a truth to one's inner self, however imaginary that might be, no less than freedom from coercion. Accordingly, if the *au* in autism can be identified with the *au* in autonomy, it is in part because *the au in autism has already been identified, by autistics and neurotypicals alike, with the au in authenticity*. The auto-biographers here have mostly taken such authenticity to be an inherent aspect of their condition, and their largely neurotypical audience has, in turn, celebrated their narratives of overcoming with reference to precisely this perceived virtue. That is to say, the tremendous popularity of such life stories stems not just from the fact that a girl like Carly Fleishman eventually overleaps the walls of autism and arrives as a fully socialized subject, but that her individuated authenticity and autonomy are so ineradicably rooted in the "obdurate silences" of her childhood that they can only be strengthened by the voyage out—that, in her case, a truly thoroughgoing immersion in the group identity machine of adolescent pop culture cannot but actualize, amplify and particularize her own, Carly's voice, which just happens to be the title of her memoir.

In Western (post/neo) liberal societies, to be dependent—whether physically, emotionally, financially, legally etc.—is to incur a stigma that compromises, in certain contexts, one's effective purchase upon plenary citizenship or even selfhood. Owing to the manifold behavioral and communicative challenges posed by autism, people on the spectrum are generally regarded as occupying a position of dependency and often find themselves discounted if not disparaged on that basis. One recent discursive means of countering that individualistic bias has been to stress the mythic nature of personal independence, its performative

⁵⁵ Quoted in Stuart Murray, "On Autistic Presence." *Journal of Literary Disability* 2.1 (2008), 3.

⁵⁶ Hans Asperger, 38.

⁵⁷ Kamran Nazir, *Send in the Idiots: Stories from the Other Side of Autism*. (NY: Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁵⁸ Nicholas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 102, 112.

impossibility for every subject, whatever his or her condition. On this view, relationality is our primary estate, and far from being deviations, autistics and other people with disabilities merely attest to this foundational reality in a particularly conspicuous manner. Thus, according to Tobin Siebers, disability studies "represent[s] human society not as a collection of autonomous beings, some of whom will lose their independence, but as a community of frail bodies that rely on others for survival. Notice that dependence does not figure here as an individual character trait...but as a structural component of human society."⁵⁹ The anti-biographers I have been discussing, however, take just the opposite tack. They forthrightly embrace the myth of individual autonomy as in a sense their peculiar biopolitical destiny. To this end, they leverage certain of the socially detached characteristics associated with autism into a robust image of personal self-sufficiency, authenticity and integrity. If autism entails certain material forms of dependency, these writers suggest, it also grounds and enables a *higher, spiritual form of independence*, a self-possession of the mind or soul, as exceptional in practice as it is exalted in theory.

Stuart Murray has trenchantly suggested that we as a culture have passed in some measure from stigmatizing autism to the barely more appealing practice of sentimentalizing autism.⁶⁰ I believe he is right as far as that goes. But the burden of my argument on this occasion is that our culture, assisted by our autistic life writers, does not (only) sentimentalize autism as a disabled stereotype, but rather, or but also, as the repository of a liberal myth of individualism, not only as a brand new species of otherness (Murray's claim), but rather, or but also, as the after image of a lost collective, dare I say normative, ego ideal.

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Valente, Joseph. "Is the AU in Autism the AU in Autonomy?," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 15 no. 2 (Spring 2016): 71-84.

⁵⁹ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*. (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 2008), 182.

⁶⁰ Stuart Murray, "Autism and the Contemporary Sentimental: Fiction and the Narrative Fascination of the Present." *Literature and Medicine* 25.1 (2006), 25; "On Autistic Presence," 1-5.