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# Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor

Dynamic Relation and a Classical Autist's Typed Message

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**Fig. 1** "Larry Bissonnette Painting,"  
c.2005-2007. Courtesy Syracuse University.



*My muralistic lettered view of life is stimulated not by likenesses of reality but by intuitions of plentiful feelings and sensations. Creation of dramatic painting starts each time in the movement of fingers on sopping, great malleable gobs of paint (My Classic Life 2005). [1]*

*Typing is like letting your finger hit keys with accuracy. Leniency on that is not tolerated. Am easily language impaired. Artmaking is like alliance people develop with their muscles after deep massage. You can move freely without effort (Inclusion Institutes n.d.).*

—Larry Bissonnette

for Larry and Pascal

## A Common Matter of Fingers

In his short commentary [2] on a “papal red” painting entitled “Birds would violate airline dapper standards for appearance but the skies sport vivider dayglo colors when it can fly freely and uncensored by mankind” (Biklen 2005: 179), autistic painter Larry Bissonnette imagines a realm of unencumbered artistic activity. “Not allowing people with disabilities their patterns of inspiring art through total freedom of expression,” he reiterates, “is like limiting creativity with censorship” (Biklen 2005: 179). As he notes in another commentary, [3] part of which serves as the essay’s first epigraph, verisimilitude doesn’t interest him; rather, he paints to his senses, and the senses in autism are often especially charged. With tremendous wit he links the “vivider dayglo colors” of the painting’s skies with the birds’ freedom to soar as they wish. There would be a violation of airliner decorum, he contends, if winged restrictions—what he figures as censorship--were in place.

The rest of the commentary proceeds like this:

Artists like Larry urgently make situations of doing art into large statements; occupying worlds of public awareness; calling for justice for people without speech; praying for true freedom of splashing language over pricey spreads in people beautiful but superficial magazines; mowing down stereotypes of disability and leaving people speechless over power of brushed on with wild, outside the mainstream ideas, steeped in the tradition of autistic compulsivity (Biklen 2005: 179).

Far from reflecting an inability to understand, let alone to make, metaphors, [4] the commentary, like everything Bissonnette writes, is replete with them: splashing language, mown down stereotypes, brushed on ideas, and an autistic tradition. That last figure asks us to imagine a kind of painterly heritage and perhaps even a perseverative school, one with intense sensory processing and a need to pattern at its core. Such art, Bissonnette hopes, will leave the neurotypical viewer speechless because disabused of his stereotypes. It will leave her, in his particularly loaded figure, classically autistic because unable to talk. Finally, it will leave her in the space of the visual, not without language (though

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maybe without conventional language), thinking in images. Bissonnette, more than any classical autistic I know, produces “autie-type” [5] with abandon: metaphor after metaphor emerges in his typed communication. This cognitive “taxi” races across town, propelled, as we will see, by the mysterious fuel of touch.

The two epigraphs stage this connection between words and images as a common matter of fingers and a disparate matter of technique. “Creation of dramatic painting starts each time in the movement of fingers on sopping, great malleable gobs of paint,” Bissonnette writes in the second sentence of the first epigraph. This statement surely reflects what Erin Manning, referring to Amanda Baggs, calls “articulation through sensation” (2009a: 215). It is literally “*felt thought*” (Manning 2009a: 214; my emphasis). The synecdoche of fingers makes manifest both the problem of bodily integrity and the instrument of hyper and hypo-sensation in classical autism. Dispensing with a brush, Bissonnette’s fingers make direct contact with the “sopping, great malleable gobs of paint.” One can almost feel language emerging from this tactile encounter. In contrast, “typing is like letting your finger hit keys with accuracy.” “Leniency on that,” Bissonnette notes, “is not tolerated.” Not only does the keyboard seem to provide less palpable input, the need to be both independent and precise, which requires strenuous effort in the face of significant sensorimotor challenges, produces stress. “Am easily language impaired,” he remarks, aware of his characteristic typos and syntactical errors.

And then he shifts immediately, paratactically, into the domain of his preferred activity: “Armaking is like alliance people develop with their muscles after deep massage. *You can move freely without effort*” (*My Classic Life* 2005: my emphasis). The analogy seems preposterous until you consider the sensory and movement challenges of classical autistics. Art making facilitates bodily organization—a proprioceptive “alliance” (or physiological metaphor) in Bissonnette’s figure. It enables him to function effectively. It relaxes him. “Practically, doing art relieves overload by providing outlet for stress,” he says in the short documentary, *My Classic Life as an Artist*. [6] Estranged from the ordinary sensory processing and movement of neurotypicals, Bissonnette allows us to see what is otherwise too

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seamlessly and effortlessly coordinated and hence left unremarked upon. He returns us to our relational bodies. Painting's massage—one thinks of Temple Grandin's hug machine [7]—awakens him into a world of processual movement. "Seeing work done isn't totally satisfying," he asserts, "because I'm rigged for process and not completion" (*My Classic Life* 2005). His paintings jig and swirl--utterly vibrantly--and they come one after another, just like his figures of speech. As the organization where he does his art, Grass Roots Art and Community Effort, puts it, "Bissonnette has always manifested an irrepressible creativity. He was drawing prolifically at age five.... Now living at home, he enjoys showing examples of his tremendous output" (GRACE 2002).

But don't think for a second that Bissonnette is unaware of the politics of artistic production and quality—how even his preferred domain can be regulated by disciplinary pressures. In the passage from which the second epigraph is taken, he writes, "Others would say serious art is made creatively holding paint brushes nicely in a proper art school way. Scrap that approach. Work like Larry on letting your hands take off on the large paper without dealing with orderly way of premeditating every stroke" (Inclusion Institutes n.d.). Bissonnette wants to fly, as his implied metaphor makes clear, in an utterly untutored and unrestricted fashion. In doing so, he can give the sky its "vivid dayglo colors"; he can dispense with a simple notion of the "real" or "given." Notice that when he speaks of linguistic communication, he says, "Typing is *like* letting your finger hit keys with accuracy" (Inclusion Institutes n.d.; my emphasis). That "like" may reflect a compulsive analogizing, so that an object may even need to be *like* itself, but the word also asks us to consider something else: *inaccurate* typing, letting your finger "take off" on the keys, disrespecting all manner of convention. What if we were to "tolerate leniency?" Bissonnette seems slyly to suggest. He wants "splashing language," repaired relation through metaphor—"great gobs" of it. Typing is *really* like letting your finger hit whatever keys it wants. In such a scenario, the alphabet potentially crumbles--not only words but also letters lose their distinctions. Perhaps they even become figures for one another.

Bissonnette's writing can be thought of as heading toward the ideal of undirected, sensuous painting. It constitutes a kind of compromise, where language, particularly metaphor, is a typed message (and/or typed message). The product of a necessary corporeal "alliance," it enables purposeful, effortless movement. Although Bissonnette's words aren't actually concrete, they feel that way because they preserve the tactile prompt that makes multi-sensorial delight, not to mention the paintings themselves, possible. As Anne Donnellan and others point out, classical autistics have trouble staging the customary relation of the senses and body parts, which must subtly cooperate to produce the seamless integrity of neurotypical functioning (Donnellan, Hill, and Leary 2010). The tricks that autistics employ to compensate—touching something to make sight useable, for example—reveal the necessary relation: there are no discrete faculties. As the drive to pattern links distinct entities through a process of visual, auditory or olfactory comparison, the equivalent shows up in language through the practice of touch-based typing. Touch literally coordinates thought, and not just any kind of thought: rather, sensuous, relational thought. No doubt the process is fueled by significant right-hemispheric activity, and no doubt Bissonnette attempts to reproduce the visual as language. Here, Manning's notion of "relationscape" seems particularly relevant, as analogy demarcates an alternative space of movement (Manning 2009a). [8] Word, image, person, object, environment—each is reconfigured by the principle of dynamic interconnectedness. If, as Manning argues with respect to Amanda Baggs, atypical sensory processing in autism helps to produce a "leaky" self—a self more open to relation--than metaphor is that self's leaky language.

And yet, as I've already intimated, and discussed in any number of essays, relation is a controversial proposition with classical autistics. Like Jamie Burke and my son, DJ, Bissonnette began using language through facilitated communication and to this day still requires intermittent contact on the shoulder or back to type. The fetish of complete independence renders even someone like Bissonnette suspect in the eyes of those who view facilitated communication as always and completely spurious. In *Reasonable People* I offer a number of explanations for the excessive opposition to the technique, including profound anxiety about models of complex agency (Savarese 2007). As Lisa Cartwright Ralph James Savarese. "Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor." *Inflexions* 5, "Simondon: 188 Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics" (March 2012). 184-223. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org)

argues in her book, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child*, “The case against FC was so volatile...because the method made absolutely blatant the uncomfortable fact of intersubjectivity and dependency as requisites of sociality in a culture that holds onto a notion of the autonomous subject as the proud cornerstone of democratic freedom even as technological means of mediation proliferate” (2008: 161). Cartwright usefully underscores the relationscape of *all* human activity and, in doing so, implicitly urges us to be less insistent about literal independence.

Exploring the notion of a “typed massage,” one needs to be ever conscious of the two kinds of input or touch that Bissonnette receives (from the paint or keyboard and from his facilitator) and, as well, of the performed relationscape that FC enacts, a relationscape amplified by Bissonnette’s myriad, often mixed, and spatially attuned metaphors. FC, Bissonnette writes, “lands basis for neurological collection of spatial awareness. Ladle of doing language meaningfully is lost in the soup of disabled map of autism so I need potholder of touch to grab it” (*My Classic Life* 2005). The potholder of touch rescues the heated instrument of linguistic expression from the mesmerizing murk of autism. Mediating the customary tactile encounter, it helps to gather crucial information about the pot (proprioception) and thereby makes ladling (or typing) possible. Put too simply, organized language requires an organized, or at least semi-organized, body. It’s as if this sort of metaphorizing were the concrete working out of sensory input: the mind and body trying to position themselves in space in order to function productively. In an essay on Tito Mukhopadhyay, perhaps the world’s most well known non-speaking Autist, I speak of a postcolonial “aroundness” that accompanies atypical proprioception (Savarese 2010b); something very similar is happening here, especially when the figures endeavor to map problems of injustice. As he ponders objects, concepts and words, Bissonnette tries to feel his way into new relations.

## Art and Letters Learn to Cohabitate

In a work entitled “Paints Get Really Loused Up By My Signature So Both Art and Letters Learn to Cohabitate,” Bissonnette presents a rectangular canvas of reds, purples, pinks and blues. The painting is largely abstract, and running through the middle of it, from left to right, appears the artist’s name—Larry John Bissonnette—in large, white, painted letters.



**Fig. 2** Larry Bissonnette, “Paints Get Really Loused Up by My Signature so Both Art and Letters Learn to Cohabitate,” 1997. Courtesy of Douglas Biklen.

In places, the letters appear partially smudged, as if the paint underneath hadn’t entirely dried and the new paint had begun to mingle with it. The short commentary reads: “Powered print treats painted images well as long as colors Larry selects match. Larry loves pink and purple because pressured painter gets to lighten stroke” (Biklen 2005: 176). It’s almost impossible to miss the “p”s and “r”s and “t”s—all of those inherently meaningless but nonetheless pleasurable, because patterned, sound effects. It’s also difficult to miss the attention to the activity of painting itself: the preference for lighter strokes and perhaps the sensory requirements for producing them. Bissonnette paints independently; he does not need the touch of facilitation, though he does need a kind of coach or “persuader to do great art when creativity is clashing with serious autistic stubbornness” (*My Classic Life* 2005)—a distinction to which I will return.

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The charged relationship between word and image, hinted at in a commentary already discussed—“my muralistic lettered view of life” (Biklen 2005: 182)—might, however, elude the viewer who is unfamiliar with Bissonnette’s life story. Presumed retarded, Bissonnette spent ten years, from age eight to eighteen, at the Brandon Training School in Vermont, an institution for special needs children. Later, he was incarcerated at the Vermont Psychiatric Hospital in Waterbury. In the documentary, *My Classic Life as an Artist*, Bissonnette, who wrote the film’s screenplay, reflects on his experience:

Nasty residential better for growing vegetables rather than people, Brandon Training School. No one should limit learning of truth in life to closed rooms occupied only by people with no natural means to communicate. Going back in desolation where it’s only me and letterless walls is not pleasant to think about. Nothing “apartheids” you like the insensitive world of institutional existence (*My Classic Life* 2005).

While the “letterless walls” function here as a figure for imposed illiteracy, walls generally function in Bissonnette’s writing as screens upon which a more humane future can be written or painted and upon which the imagination can “elevate [things] to their artistic potential” (*My Classic Life* 2005). One painting’s title suggests, for example, that “massively added on with tons of entirely empty of people windows looks less imposing if walls are painted in papal reds” (Biklen 2005: 177). In a piece called “Shift and Changes in My Life,” Bissonnette notes, “It’s ever so easy to paper walls with ambitious words but the real difference in clearing Larry’s needs has been the wonderful, caring, less worried about Larry weirdnesses and more attuned to his potential, people who support him everyday.” Notice the conflation of art and typed communication, as if the latter, too, might be framed and hung. Though he focuses on people and not words in this statement, what comes across is the dedicated community in which literacy, an essential marker for intelligence, can arise.



Such a community stands in stark contrast to the desolation of institutionalized living, and it goes a long way in ameliorating both that living's horrors and the arrogance of expert judgment. As Bissonnette writes in "Keys Towards Promise Land of Free Expression,"

It's politically correct to say that kind, needing gratification for giving, people started impetus for building structurally sound yet inhumane institutions.... Nearly twenty years have lodged in my memory, skating on icy surfaces of slippery thoughts and fears about trials of oppression on my personal vision of life. Now work should begin on repairing damage of the past (Quoted in Savarese 2007: 415).

"The Nelson Mandela of cognitive disability ('nothing apartheids you'), Bissonnette proposes, in effect, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission: a way forward that acknowledges the past but isn't consumed by bitterness" (Quoted in Savarese 2007: 415). That way involves producing art *and* language in an unfettered space but also unfettered art and language, the two allowed to cohabitate—indeed, the two allowed to directly communicate. Thus, it seems appropriate that his works perform the relational reconstitution of each medium, with his name frequently appearing as so much more than a mere signature and the figures becoming symbolic through his intricately worded titles and commentaries.

In countless places Bissonnette analogizes one medium *as* the other, as if to underscore their necessary relation. In *My Classic Life*, he reports: "Palatial, with work sorted by size, studio space is also needed to let me do art in comfortable surroundings like a librarian putting books away in a lofty ceilinged, well lit, tall shelved, frescoed, round room" (*My Classic Life* 2005). In a section from a conference presentation entitled "Striving Toward Independent Articulation of Personal Thoughts," he advocates moving beyond mere inspiration when witnessing FC's efficacy: "Peering at situations of really powerfully demonstrated success is, however, only the prologue to frescoing someone's understanding orderly opening door of pleasing self-resolution through FC" (Bissonnette 2001b). The particular art trope—frescoing—seems to suggest

something less decorative than ordinary painting because built into the walls and ceiling. FC's frescoing transforms the autistic body, making it beautifully communicative. In this same piece, after a series of figurative flourishes, Bissonnette comically remarks, "Understanding picturesque statements of Larry does nothing for training in method of FC. You better follow sentences in the next paragraph" (Bissonnette 2001b). In other words, a painterly evocation in words won't help someone to learn the technique.

Although he asserts in *My Classic Life* that the "role of art is to prepare thoughts visually in a way that language clearly can't articulate," Bissonnette doesn't by any means abandon the former for the latter. Again, he establishes a relation through analogy. Consider the title of another painting: "Plenty of art very like modern man doesn't stress high issues of morality so praise me for telling stories shining colorfully over northern skies" (Biklen 2005: 176). The implied metaphor invites us to imagine painting as a way of "telling stories" and, further, such storytelling as shining like the sun in his paintings' skies. The tendency to compare words to images and images to words in deeply figurative formulations is so prevalent in Bissonnette's writing that it almost seems neurologically overdetermined—beyond how a non-autistic painter might instinctively use art as a constant referent or Bissonnette's own desire to demonstrate his literacy. How to understand this? If synesthesia is the processing of one sense through another, then we might try to conceive of synesthetic media, or the processing of one medium through another—in this case, images through words and vice versa. Picture, if you will, the cross-wired body of the arts, where regions of "the brain" ordinarily devoted to a particular function actually perform a different one, transforming each in the process.

Interestingly enough, a study from 2005 seems to support something like this proposition (Koshino et al. 2005). Using fMRI technology, the study found that some people with autism remember letters quite differently from neurotypicals. They rely much more heavily on the right hemisphere, which excels at processing shapes and visual information. In contrast, neurotypicals rely much more heavily on the left hemisphere, which excels at processing language. While both the autistic and non-autistic participants successfully remembered the Ralph James Savarese. "Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor." *Inflexions* 5, "Simondon: 193 Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics" (March 2012). 184-223. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org)

names of letters, the study hypothesized a problem in the autistic group with complex reasoning, and it attributed this problem to additional differences in activation patterns. Autistics used the posterior parts of the brain, which work to perceive details, while non-autistics used the anterior parts, which enable higher-level thinking. Underconnectivity in autistic brains, the study proposed, makes it difficult to see the proverbial forest for the trees, though the individual trees might be seen quite well – indeed, better than when neurotypicals observe them. In this way, the study recommended therapies that strive for greater synchrony across multiple brain regions by stressing problem-solving activities and creative thinking. [9] Plasticity is the key concept: the study’s authors believe that autistic brains might very well become more connected.

What if, like the study’s participants, Bissonnette remembers letters visually, as shapes? What if his right hemisphere is doing the work ordinarily performed by the left hemisphere, with the resulting abundance of metaphor and imagistic detail, not to mention the syntactical problems associated with left-hemispheric dysfunction (or relative inactivity)? What if, in other words, Bissonnette has somehow achieved the greater connectivity required for higher order thinking but has retained atypical cerebral dominance and activation patterns? Then language, as in a recent poem by Mukhopadhyay about birds on electrical wires, would be more like calligraphy: a pleasing design that also did symbolic work (Mukhopadhyay 2010). [10] It would lose its strictly utilitarian function, and the typical excess of poetry, its infra-symbolic intentions, would be taken a step further. Bissonnette’s lack of subordinate clauses – “Nasty residential better for growing vegetables rather than people, Brandon Training School” --clearly reveals a problem with syntax, but it’s as if the modifiers are standing in for details perceived before the apprehension of a whole and, thus, must come before that whole (and the word it goes by).

Subsequent sections of this essay will explore the crucial connection between movement, cognition, and language, and they will attempt to show how innovative occupational therapy, including facilitated communication, might partially ameliorate problems with, among other things, the basal ganglia in autism. (For those unfamiliar with anatomy, “The basal ganglia...channel Ralph James Savarese. “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor.” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics” (March 2012). 184-223. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org)

sensory information from and to various cortical areas, integrating it with 'linguistic' information; they also sequence cognitive/linguistic operations" (Lieberman 2002: 82). Significantly, Bissonnette's syntactical challenges in no way interfere with insight; his figures make powerful and imaginative connections in a political context that he is very much aware of. There is nothing mechanical or obtuse about them. As he says in the commentary on a painting entitled "Aunt Theresa Rings in Her Eyes Pizzazz," "I am seriously past learning swimming in the shallow end of the pool of language" (Biklen 2005: 181).

A synesthetic approach to Bissonnette's work finds support in a painting entitled "Seeing Eye Friend Felicia in Gathering of My Very Canned Together Speech." The guide dog trope presents hearing as vision: Felicia "gathers" Bissonnette's echolalic speech, which "comes down [his] pipes like a pre-programmed train that is way off its itinerary" (*My Classic Life* 2005), and translates it. The word "gathers" not only renders speech more concrete than it is, but it also evokes the force of proprioception, as words, like muscles, "develop an alliance" – that is, become usefully organized and thereby "move freely."



**Fig. 3** Larry Bissonnette, "Seeing Eye Friend Felicia in Gathering of My Very Canned Together Speech," c.1993. Courtesy of Douglas Biklen.

Bissonnette needs Felicia to facilitate understanding, for the world lacks sensitive interpreters of autistic language. This is so even when he types, as the commentary on the painting makes clear: “Larry’s somewhat bastardization of English language puts friends in the role of interpreters extraordinaire” (Biklen 2005: 175). As a kind of blurred distinction and the primary form of the painter’s linguistic liberty, metaphor, we might say, is visually impaired; however insightful, it requires a guide dog to see literally. The implications of the trope are deeply ironic because Bissonnette is so visual and because he just might be remembering language as shapes.

And yet, the “blindness” of cross-wired sensory perception or synesthetic media simply reflects exaggerated interaction: one sense or medium doing the work of its partner. It could also be called, without any pejorative connotations, deafness or another impairment of the senses. The point is it reveals new forms of discernment—indeed a new kind of vision. And it instructs by foregrounding relation: from how the senses must cooperate in neurotypicals to perform their seemingly discrete functions (as we will see in the very next section), to the startling analogies that Bissonnette produces, to the physical and interpretive facilitation provided by caregivers. The poet Wallace Stevens once proclaimed, with uncanny relevance, “The senses paint/by metaphor...The truth must be/that you do not see, you experience, you feel,/ that the buxom eye brings merely its element/to the total thing” (1972: 197). Echoing this point, Michel Serres contends, “The eye loses its pre-eminence in the very area in which it is dominant, in painting” (2009: 37). “The painter makes us see through touch,” he says (140). Analogously, “the skin has eyes, like a peacock’s tail” (37), and “we hear through our skin and feet” (141).

The instruction of such “blindness” literally carries over into the painting itself. Like many of Bissonnette’s works, this one contains a Polaroid picture taped to the surface. Listen to the artist describe his idiosyncratic aesthetic practice:

Little polaroids are like toppings on artistically loaded up without falling over ice cream sundaes. People differ in their acceptance of point blank range approach to taking pictures. Totally raptured

faces are not what you often see. Likenesses of seriously petrified by flashbulbs people is more what you see positioned randomly on the painting (*My Classic Life* 2005).

Bissonnette's subjects are blinded by the flash—their vision fails, and their faces generally record the discomfort of sensory overload. (Felicia, in contrast, seems perfectly calm.) Giving neurotypicals an idea of what autism is sometimes like—it can also be “rapturous”—Bissonnette introduces “petrified” verisimilitude into an arena “stimulated...by intuitions of plentiful feelings and sensations” (Biklen 2005: 182). The real—one might even say, the literal—is knocked off its proverbial horse; no longer sensorially certain, it strains to gallop. In its place, the figurative or relational reigns. [11] If Felicia is the “seeing” eye friend of autistic (or metaphorical) language, then the painting, which incorporates this language along with “petrified” verisimilitude, is the “seeing eye friend” of neurotypical perception, which must be tutored in autistic sensing and knowing—which must be guided into and through a space of neurodiversity.

### **The Spoon Has Grown Quiet**

Mesmoception—that's what philosopher Brian Massumi calls “the medium where inputs from all five senses meet, across subsensate excitation, and become flesh together, tense and quivering” (2002: 61). Because the senses must cooperate with each other—and in fact depend on each other to perform their functions—he refers to mesmoception as the “synesthetic sensibility” (Massumi 2002: 62). Take, for example, proprioception, that other crucial sense, which allows the body to locate itself in space. It “folds tactility into the body,” Massumi states,

enveloping the skin's contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera. The muscles and ligaments register as conditions of movement what the skin internalizes as qualities: the hardness of the floor underfoot as one looks into a mirror becomes a resistance enabling station and movement; the softness of a cat's fur becomes a lubricant for the

motion of the hand. Proprioception translates the exertions and ease of the body's encounter with objects into a muscular memory of relationality. This is the cumulative memory of skill, habit, posture (2002: 59).

Although we have naturalized the motion of our hands, believing it to be simply an expression of will, the senses, as both a force in the present and a remembered force from the past, facilitate such an action. Dynamic relationality over time gives birth to a subject who more than a bit arrogantly declares himself an individual, forgetting the radical relationscape of his very own sensing body and its palpable dependency on the physical world.

Or take sight, which requires movement to develop, as a notorious experiment with immobilized cats demonstrated, and which needs the other senses to work properly. Massumi tells the story of a scientist-pilot, "trained to orient expertly during high-altitude maneuvers" (2002: 157), who "anesthetized his own ass" (157). "Amazing but true," Massumi writes,

he could no longer see where he was. He could no longer orient. He had scientifically proven that we see with the seat of our pants. The interconnection of the senses is so complete that the removal of a strategic patch of tactile/proprioceptive feed makes the whole process dysfunctional (2002: 157).

Put simply, "pure vision is visual chaos" (Massumi 2002: 146), as the more formal Ganzfeld experiments made clear. Even with the controlled stimulation of the other senses, when the eyes were deprived of both an object and a context, a "complete absence of seeing" (Massumi 2002: 145) resulted – what one participant termed "levels of nothingness" (146) and what a researcher described, interestingly enough, as akin to a high-altitude flight in which all sense of positionality is lost. Any number of the participants hallucinated. Masumi stresses that "determinate vision emerges from movement" (2002: 149) in actual, object-filled space, which then triggers the essential co-functioning of the other senses. He explains,

Movement multiplies visual and intermodal feedback loops. It enables a continuous, complexifying, cross-referencing of variations to each other—an indexing of aspects of unfolding experience to its own products and of its products to their ever-changing, unperceived field of emergence (Massumi 2002: 156).

What happens, though, when these feedback loops are interrupted or in some way altered by states such as dreaming or schizophrenia?

The difference between dream, experimentally induced hallucination, and pathological hallucination from each other and from “natural” perception pertains to the kind and complexity of experience’s self-referencing to its own ongoing event. The more impoverished the conditions for feedback-enabled cross-referencing, the flightier will be the creative addition of the more to reality. The danger is that, through insufficient cross-referencing, experience might overreach its own lifeboat (Massumi 2002: 156).

Here Massumi helps us to understand just how dynamically and cumulatively integrated are the sensing faculties and, further, how their dysfunction might cause experience to flounder. A philosopher very much interested in aesthetic practices, he encourages us to entertain overtly synesthetic projects where “the body and thought [are] together in sensation” (Massumi 2002: 97), projects whose medium is the “body as sensible concept” (90). Surely, autistic writers and painters fit this bill. But let us stay with the sensory and movement challenges they face in order to better understand the role of touch in language production. It’s worth reiterating the range of sensory challenges: gestalt perception, fragmented perception, fragmented gestalt perception, delayed perception, distortion, hypersensitivity, hyposensitivity, inconsistent hyper- and hyposensitivity, sensory overload, sensory agnosia, and systems shutdown. Add to these sensory issues profound problems with proprioception, vestibular functioning, and body percept, and it’s a wonder classical autistics don’t throw up their arms—or, rather, flap—and quit.

In *A Positive Approach to Autism*, Stella Waterhouse recalls a case of severe polyneuritis in which a twenty-seven year old woman lost all proprioception. One of Oliver Sacks’ neurological tales, the case allows us, Waterhouse contends,

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to imagine what autism might sometimes be like and how any conception of the self is inextricably tied to the physical body. Sacks concludes, “She has lost, with her sense of proprioception, the fundamental, organic mooring of identity—at least that corporeal identity, or body-ego, which Freud sees as the basis of self” (quoted in Waterhouse 1998: 53). But we need not look beyond autism itself to understand the significance of an alternative neurology. A “lack of control over volition and self-directed expressive action” (Waterhouse 1998: 222), “problems...with a sense of being in a unitary, discrete body” (222), “fragmented perceptions of her own body and its environment” (222)—all of these things, in Lisa Cartwright’s summary of Donna Williams’ challenges, plague people with autism.

And yet, many learn crucial coping strategies. Olga Bogdashina elucidates the importance of mono-processing, for instance, which “individuals with autism define...as one of their involuntary adaptations to avoid sensory overload or hypersensitivity” (2004: 79). When sight is operating and the person is able to observe an object in remarkable detail, writes Bogdashina, he

might lose the conscious awareness of any information coming through other senses. Thus, while [he] sees something, he does not understand what he is being told and does not feel touch. When the visual stimulus fades out, the sound can be processed, but then the sound is the only information the person is dealing with (disconnected from sight). As the person focuses on only one modality at a time, the sound may be experienced as louder (hypersensitivity) because it is all the person focuses on (2004: 79).

Tito Mukhopadhyay famously prefers auditory input while Temple Grandin prefers visual input. In *Autism and Sensing: The Unlost Instinct*, Donna Williams nicely elaborates on the relationship between mono-processing and body percept:

I could feel the texture of the wood...but in taking the action physically to do so I would have no sense of my own hand. I could also switch channels and feel my own hand but would lose sensation of what my hand was in contact with. This also applied to my own body parts. If I touched my own face with my hand, I

could feel the texture of my face *or* the effect upon my hand, but not both at the same time. I was either in a constant state of jolting perceptual shifts or I remained on one sensory channel or the other (Quoted in Bogdashina 2004: 80).

Imagine living in such a body. Though it would afford, at times, considerable sensual delight, enormous energy would have to be expended to figure out where one was and what precisely was occurring. Would there be any energy left for the task of symbolic interpretation, that form of cognition that supercedes basic perception or pure sensory knowing in neurotypical development?

In addition to mono-processing, many classical autistics resort to a kind of sensory compensation, where the various modalities are called upon to do things for which they are not primarily suited, in order to combat dysfunction. As Bogdashina puts it, when autistic people “have visual problems, they use their ears, nose, tongue or hand to ‘see’—they compensate for their temporary ‘blindness’ through other senses. Thus, a child may tap an object to produce the sound and recognizes what it is.... Some children smell people and objects to identify them” (2004: 84). What if that pilot-scientist had to use his ass exclusively to see? Could he learn to do it? What might flying, then, be like? Bogdashina reminds us that a majority of autistics finds smell and touch more reliable; these senses tend to be their compensatory ones. As an example, she relates the story of Alex, which I quote in full because it is so evocative—indeed, it reveals a way in which neuro-atypicality might be a potential poetic advantage.

Alex smells and touches objects or food to check his visual perception of them. Sometimes he shuts down his vision completely and uses his ears to “see” his environments. He can recognize the objects by the sounds they produce much better than their visual images. The disadvantage of this “auditory seeing” is that when his hearing becomes overloaded and cannot cope with auditory and “visual” information, it may either become hypersensitive (and painful) or shut down altogether. Then he finds his “world” unusually quiet (“The spoon has grown quiet”) and dangerous. It leads to panic attacks.

Alex has difficulty sleeping because “sound pictures” in his environment make it hard for him to relax. All these experiences cause anxiety, stress and panic attacks (Bogdashina 2004: 84).

Synesthesia joins with another figure of speech, personification, to re-animate the world—in this case anxiously. Born of a literal experience, the perception is received by neurotypicals figuratively (“The spoon has grown quiet.”). And yet, the senses always proceed by analogy—just more noticeably with autistics. Perhaps the literal itself is a mystification, as it only emerges when unnaturally alienated from its sensorial siblings.

My son, DJ, each morning opens up multiple bottles of shampoo and starts smelling them. Doing so “lubricates,” to use Massumi’s word, the morning routine of putting on his clothes and brushing his teeth. It makes his senses—his more reliable senses—and his body work better. Consider how an experiment with blind children, which stimulated their olfactory receptors, improved their sense of touch, allowing them to identify objects more effectively (Ayres 1979: 142). The introduced olfactory agents had nothing to do with the objects themselves, which gave off no smell. Negotiating the front walk at school, DJ will touch every single tree that lines it. He says that anxiety frequently makes him “deaf” and that his vision is undependable. He often loses his body. By touching the trees, he can find himself; tactile sensation provides crucial input while he is on the move. Sometimes, he purposefully falls to the ground to jolt his uncoordinated senses, the seat of his pants playing a crucial role in the restoration of multi-modal feeling. Almost everywhere he goes, he lugs the heaviest of backpacks in order to locate his body. “Movement vision,” writes Massumi, “is sight turned proprioceptive” (2002: 59).

### **Touching Poles and Talking in Peaked Off the Chart Grunts and Yells**

And so, we return to Larry Bissonnette who, in his commentary on a painting humorously entitled “Larry Looks Like Latter Day, Rather Rooted in Routines of Catholic Church, Saint. Massive Miracle if Acceptable Behavior for a Saint Ever Gets Achieved,” remarks,

My claiming of sainthood involves order of control over Larry's impulsive and relationship battering behaviors. Total immersion in priestly work plays well in roles of truly normal people but can't if a person moves the way I do, touching poles with his nose and talking in peaked off the charts grunts and yells (Biklen 2005: 180).



**Fig. 4** Larry Bissonnette, "Larry Looks Like Latter Day, Rather Rooted in Routines of Catholic Church, Saint. Massive Miracle if Acceptable Behavior for a Saint Ever Gets Achieved," 1999. Courtesy of Douglas Biklen.

"If a person moves the way I do, touching poles with his nose" – perhaps he is using his nose to see or to hear, as Bogdashina suggests; maybe as with DJ, smell helps to fortify his other senses and thereby to facilitate action.

Like many classical autistics, Bissonnette has trouble with movement-sensation. He complains of "sonic sensitivity" (*My Classic Life* 2005), says that he is often "distracted by noise and babbling speech" (Bissonnette 2001b). He processes these things too intensely, the latter difficult to decode when so aggravating. ("We hear through our skull, abdomen and thorax. We hear through our muscles, nerves and tendons. Our body-box, strung tight, is covered head to toe with a tympanum" (2009: 141), writes Michel Serres, whose strategic hyperbole oddly illuminates autistic hypersensitivity.) Describing what facilitated communication helps to "overcome," Bissonnette speaks of "movement lapses": "Strongest therapy for people with no means of expression is sensational,

controversial, revolutionary, technically subtle FC. It involves understanding movement lapses of people and providing physical support to help overcome them” (Bissonnette 2001b). Not surprisingly, he figures the technique as an automobile. “Motoring this new vehicle began in pristined with outside natural scenery, Vermont almost ten years ago,” he reports in *My Classic Life as an Artist*. “Learning about role of neurological and motor designing problems in communication” (Bissonnette 2001b), facilitators can help “stumblers of communication” (Bissonnette 2001b), he contends.

Bissonnette’s metaphors usefully condense movement and communication, allowing us to see why typing independently—which, again, he has learned to do but for intermittent touch on his back or shoulder—is so difficult. Asked to comment on a video about independent typing, he declares, “At Cannes Film Festival it should win award for documentary of tension between affirmation of mental capacity and pain of physical production of language” (Bissonnette, n.d.a.). These tropes of communication emerge from Bissonnette’s bodily encounter with the world. “Sock sand racing into vast beach of expression is not totally accident free” (Bissonnette, n.d.a.), he explains. The absence of shoes, the shifting resistance of the sand—each defamiliarizes walking. The figure reveals how clumsy communicative cognition can be. The beach awaits, but the body interferes. It also shows what facilitation contributes: precisely the resistance of the sand, the tactile input—maybe even those socks, which encase the feet and provide their own feedback.

But even this is too simple, for the facilitation is itself dynamic and multi-sensory: more like an air-traffic controller whose fundamental contact or radio transmission is touch. The “sock sand” figure resonates with that of the “potholder”: both imply a mediating force that materializes form and grounds cognition. It might be profitable to conceive of the facilitating relationship as an affective glove or hug—even the OT’s deep-pressure “hamburger” with mats. [12] In short, a tactilely elicited “alliance.” Temple Grandin has said famously that her hug machine causes her to feel more social (Grandin 1991). If we are sufficiently agile in our thinking, we may posit touch as an organizing force in both the body and mind, with language, too, requiring a kind of deep pressure. Ralph James Savarese. “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor.” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: 204 Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics” (March 2012). 184-223. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org)

The “potholder of touch” allows Bissonnette to “grab” this social instrument, which might otherwise be lost to uncoordinated sensation. The implied hyperbole of concrete words reflects a penchant for pure sensory knowing and, as well, the physical requirements of autistic communication. Importantly, these requirements must be taught, indeed palpably modeled. Bissonnette explains,

Preachers give sermons to inspire worshipers to lead clear of sin existences. Modeling lessons are more appropriate for people very distracted by noise and babbling speech. Soprano singers get instructed by teacher loosening muscles under strained with romantic crooning throats. Leaders in presidential races arrange opportunities to shake hands of people anchored on sidewalks to proudly rake in autographs of wily politicians (Bissonnette 2001b).

However much the final sentence of this statement slides away from the topic *at hand*, it continues to foreground touch. It also hints at the politics of social relation, with its figure of a campaign. Imagine democracy, it suggests, as facilitated communication: representation through a handshake.

Beyond the “movement lapses” of classical autism, it is the penchant for sensation without interpretation—what Williams calls the “unlost instinct”—that can inhibit linguistic sociality. With Amanda Baggs, we can see how the “symphony of sound and movement” (Manning 2009b: 42) in “In My Language” fails to line up with any conventional notion of personhood. As Erin Manning puts it in “What If It Didn’t All Begin and End with Containment? Toward a Leaky Sense of Self,” “We watch entranced as [Baggs] moves through the environment and it moves through her, feeling-with its forms and forces, expressing it as it expresses her” (Manning 2009b: 40). The “language” of the video’s title, which Baggs explicitly contrasts with ordinary symbolic language, reflects a radical interconnectedness—to the extent that entities fail to be strictly themselves.

I mean that when I am around a group of people, their voices may turn into the sound of water, their movements may all sort of blend together, but in their movements I see patterns not only of individuals but of the people interacting within a group, and the individual’s place within the group, and their effect on the group

and the group's effect on them, and on each other. I see this *particularly* well when not trying to understand what they're saying to each other (Quoted in Manning 2009b: 40).

"There is nothing but relation," writes Manning. "And this is what often makes it difficult to interact in the form most associated with contained selves. Containment is not in and of her experience, and she cannot easily subtract from the hyper-relation of her synesthetic and cross-modal experience to present herself as a unified verbal self" (2009b: 40).

In this way, according to Cartwright, "communication comes into play relative to...autism both as problematic and as a potential source of management or tutoring in subjectivity" (2008: 222). For Cartwright, FC helps to instill a body image, which, Silvan Tomkins argues, "appears to be primarily constituted of a set of kinesthetic and vestibular messages" (Quoted in Cartwright 2008: 255). Dynamic incorporeity arrives through affective touch: "a kind of feeling that comes together across the senses and between subjects, leaving behind a structural memory, a pathway through which a subject may anticipate the touch of an other" (Cartwright 2008: 220). Here Cartwright complicates the movement-sensation model, adding the crucial element—indeed, the motivator—of awakened sociality or differentiated communication. Once exposed to such communication, the person with autism propels him or herself into the future, desirous of this narrower field of relation, this more typical pulse of connection. Or at least he or she is now pulled in two directions. In the section entitled "Striving Toward Independent Articulation of Personal Thoughts" from his "West Coast Symposium" presentation, Bissonnette underscores the link between sensorimotor remediation and affective sustenance, which ideally end up fused in the act of facilitation. "Learning and understanding properly supplied support only starts with people practicing synthesis of emotional and physical support issued separately but roasted together on fire of communication," he says (Bissonnette 2001b).

Because FC allows an autistic to “perform as a self in relation to others,” Cartwright believes that the “facilitator thus facilitates the very structure of the order of language, her organizing activities having left a...change in the way the psyche processes the input and output of feeling rather than simply existing there in the psyche as remembered content of someone who has been there, touching” (2008: 221). “What is imparted,” she continues, “is perhaps a blueprint for bodily delimitation and control. The prosthesis of the facilitator is a training ground for future anticipation of self-controlled action with an other” (Cartwright 2008: 222). Not complete delimitation, to be sure, but enough to make linguistic communication possible: both as a motoric act—“Damn hard to nail accurately letters” (Bissonnette 2001b), Bissonnette says--and as a psychological desire. Perhaps this is why Bissonnette required full facilitation at the beginning of his language journey, even as he was making art independently, and why he still requires intermittent contact on the shoulder or back when he types. By comparison, painting is much less technically demanding, which is to say exactly social. A given work need not be representational or symbolic; it may simply depict “intuitions of plentiful feelings and sensations.” It may begin and end “in the movement of fingers on sopping, great malleable gobs of paint.”

In “Keys Toward Promised Land of Free Expression,” writing and painting come together in the figure of a march—that is, of political movement—and we get to see what human facilitation broadly understood can accomplish. Bissonnette writes:

Let me mention that its practically getting possible to create satisfying life, interesting and meaningful nowadays because really institutions’ popularity slides towards storage underground at a pace faster than police chasing stepping for escape prisoners.... You lend great sums of money for places like military mansions and meeting rooms for polygamous politicians. New lots of land for masses of people with disabilities need total pouring of organized funding for learning, artistic development, and receiving lessons on playing sports athletically. One soldier going to fight persecutionary attitudes is little deterrence. March with me. You’ll have promising strides of valiant, creating great havoc with nearly perfect, brushstrokes to inspire you (Quoted in Savarese 2007: 414).



Elsewhere Bissonnette speaks of “rhythmic painting.” For many classical autistics rhythm helps to generate and sustain purposeful movement. Here the “strides of valiant” condense an “alliance” of people on the move, overcoming justice lapses, their legs and typing arms creating egalitarian brushstrokes. No “stumbler of communication,” Bissonnette makes of painting and, by implication, of the Autist/facilitator/computer triad a figure of dynamic cooperation. Art and politics have been reunited through metaphor—through what Bissonnette calls the “true freedom of splashing language,” painting’s synesthetic partner or analog. Indeed, art has been reunited with life itself, as the former refuses to be limited by any narrow sense of where it belongs or what it can or cannot accomplish politically. The charge of mixed metaphors doesn’t even apply or, rather it seems obtuse, as this physio-cognitive and politico-aesthetic massage—this muscular message—seeks to repair division. It will not settle for anything less than a complex web of enabling relations.

### **Strides of Valiant, or Far Fetching Metaphor**

Late in *Language and Our Reptilian Brain: The Subcortical Bases of Speech, Syntax, and Thought*, Phillip Lieberman goes so far as to present human language and thought as movement. “In a sense,” he writes, “[they] can be regarded as neurally ‘computed’ motor activity, deriving from neuroanatomical systems that generate overt motor responses to environmental challenges and opportunities” (Lieberman 2002: 158). And in *Second Nature: Brain Science and Human Nature*, Gerald Edelman postulates that a “basal syntax” was the likely evolutionary precursor of our species’ most astonishing achievement:

The interaction of the basal ganglia with the motor, sensory, and prefrontal areas of the cortex may have led to a generalized capability of detecting sensorimotor sequences, a kind of “basal syntax.” Were that the case, a syntax-based true language may have arisen as an invention based on these already evolved capabilities (2007: 61).

The figure of Jamie Burke, now a senior at Syracuse University, shows how the sensorimotor challenges of autism might be addressed through activities that

purposefully exploit the connection between movement and language. Contrary to expert opinion, speech can emerge at thirteen, even later. In Burke's case it emerged through therapy on a rope swing and the physical act of typing, the motor memory of which allowed him to read aloud what his fingers had just plucked. [13]

Because in autism the natural evolution of a "basal syntax" is rendered a strenuous achievement, [14] we can see not just the motoric prerequisite of our own thought and language use but also its ongoing participation in these ostensibly abstract activities. At one point in *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres laments the lack of a "trampolinian upbringing" and then, with lyrical panache, describes two acrobats twirling relationally while chatting in the air. "This is where speech comes from" (2009: 317), he exclaims, unaware of the extent to which the trampoline figures therapeutically in the lives of many with autism. And unaware, as I will attempt to demonstrate, of how classical autistics answer his call to reinvigorate human cognition. Those who have been taught to read and to type subvert the "catastrophe of perception" that is the "triumph of the written word" (Serres 2009: 252) by "form[ing] their words through the senses" (192), by putting their often struggling and disconnected bodies back into language. As Serres contends, "The writer who merely goes for meaning does nothing but calculate; he can only be said to write when all the senses tremble within the flesh of language, semi-soft, a double variety for sight, touch, smell and taste" (2009: 128).

And in what neurotypical discourse do the senses most seem to "tremble"? Poetry, of course. Any number of scholars has noted that autistics seem to be writing in a medium akin to poetry (even as others continue to promulgate the notion that they can't process figurative language at all). [15] Bogdashina links this "seeming paradox" (2004: 110) to a difficulty "translat[ing] abstract ideas into mental images" (110). Autistics "have to employ the vocabulary available to them" (110)—concrete, sense-based words. As a result, "they may develop a highly poetic language, full of beautiful metaphors and similes" (110). In this way, a cognitive preference nicely matches up with poetry's own aversion to unmediated abstraction. Of course, there are additional explanations for these

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poetic utterances, including, as I've noted, an over-active or dominant right hemisphere, which is largely responsible for fresh figurative language and which much prefers the concrete to the abstract. [16]

Elsewhere, I have proposed that poetry might constitute a linguistic meeting point for different neurological types: one that honors both the "unlost instinct" (or pure sensory knowing) of autistics and the symbolic proclivities of neurotypicals (Savarese 2011). The sensual splendor of the world, to which classical autistics are so attentive, shows up by analogy in poetry. Patterned syntax and sound, pulsating rhythm, emotional prosody as a function of tone—these things might induce non-literate autistics to grapple with poetry's semantic content and, thus, functional language in general. In turn, neurotypicals might be restored to their sensing bodies and, as a result, better understand the sensory world of autistics. Each half of the neurological divide would commit itself to an ethic of neuro-cosmopolitanism. Each would concede the need for repair.

I have even suggested that metrical poetry, like painting, might not only calm the anxiety of classical autism but also aid in the mastery of complex motor tasks. In an interview with me, Mukhopadhyay all but says that William Blake taught him how to tie his shoes (Savarese 2010a). Mapping the rhythm of a Blake poem around his hands, he coaxed his fingers to execute the necessary movements. [17] The meter's regular pulse offered an enabling continuum—what Manning, speaking of Baggs, calls "a rhythmic reinvention of the environment's sensory dimensions" (2009a: 214). Gabrielle Starr notes that poetic rhythm activates the motor cortex; hearing it not only makes us want to move, but it also has us unconsciously simulating movement. Perhaps with rhythmic verse Mukhopadhyay found a way around the problem of mirror neuron and basal ganglia dysfunction in autism. As important, Starr has shown that poetry pursues what she calls "multisensory imagery," imagery that purposefully exploits the synesthetic (or relational) foundation of the senses. Freed from its narrow service as an effete art form, poetry thus rediscovers a larger vitality, moving Mukhopadhyay in every sense of the word. As it coaxes neurotypicals back into sensory experience, so it coaxes classical autistics into more fluid motion and what my son calls "easy breathing."

Ralph James Savarese. "Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor." *Inflexions* 5, "Simondon: 210  
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If, as Manning argues, the first half of “In My Language” “transforms space into an ambient musical instrument that moves in a dance of rhythmical becomings” (2009a: 213), if according to Baggs it offers “not...words or even visual symbols for people to interpret [but] is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment, reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings” (2009a: 215), then Bissonnette’s linguistic output—autie-type in general—might be conceived of as the reconciled halves of Baggs’ famous YouTube, or even the fulfillment of Serres’ insistence on the “flesh of language.” “There is no question,” writes Manning of the video’s translated second half, “that articulation through language *is* capable of conveying a certain complexity, bridging the worlds of sensory eventness with the affective tonality of language in the making such that a dialogue between these co-arising worlds can begin” (2009a: 214). In the passage already quoted from Bissonnette—“March with me. You’ll have promising strides of valiant, creating great havoc with nearly perfect, brushstrokes to inspire you”—metaphor is that reconciliation. It is perceptual language in-the-making: the eye, ear, nose, skin, and proprioception gone marching, quite literally on the move.

Metaphor is no literary decoration, as Lakoff and Johnson have famously pointed out. Edelman has suggested that our brains, as selectional systems, “operate *prima facie* not by logic but rather by pattern recognition.... It is likely, for example, that early human thought proceeded by metaphor, which, even with the late acquisition of precise means such as logic and mathematical thought, continues to be a major source of imagination and creativity in adult life” (2007: 58). Such pattern making obviously employed the senses, and it is as if in the person of Bissonnette we can observe this “early” form of thinking in every day life (as opposed to the specific context of a poem), along with later, more advanced cognition.

This is not to say that early humans were autistic or that Bissonnette is somehow prehistoric; rather, it is to imagine a kind of perception and language use that “proceed[s]” conspicuously by metaphor. It is to invert the customary proportion of utterances that are overtly metaphorical to those that have lost

Ralph James Savarese. “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor.” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: 211  
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their figurative origins. Instead of relegating metaphor to the “source of imagination and creativity in adult life,” as Edelman does, Bissonnette gives it a more central, or at least visible, role in human cognition. In the words of Iain McGilchrist, metaphor “*underlies all forms of understanding whatsoever, science and philosophy no less than poetry and art*” (2010: 71). “Metaphor (subserved by the right hemisphere) comes *before* denotation (subserved by the left). This is historical truth,” McGilchrist argues, “in the sense that denotative language... [is] derived from metaphors founded on immediate experience of the tangible world” (2010: 118).

The point cannot be overstated, for it allows McGilchrist to postulate, in his own way, the lamentable triumph of a certain kind of cognitive processing, a processing that he associates with the hegemony of the left-hemisphere, which dispenses with immediacy in favor of a generalized copy of experience through its system of signs. “The left hemisphere extracts typical features of objects and phenomena, abstracting from the ‘whole’” (2007: 91), Michael Trimble tells us. In contrast, sensory data “may be processed in a more primitive way by the right hemisphere, which retains a more immediate and affective valence” (Trimble 2007: 91). Metaphor, that product of the right hemisphere, allows experience to survive its passage into language, to move through the linguistic customs house of the left hemisphere without surrendering all of its undeclared items. Metaphor, writes McGilchrist,

asserts a common life that is experienced in the body of one who makes it, and the separation is only present at the linguistic level. Our sense of the commonality of the two ideas, perceptions or entities does not lie in a *post hoc* derivation of something abstracted from each of them, which is found on subsequent comparison to be similar, or even one and the same thing; but rather on a single concrete, kinaesthetic experience more fundamental than either, and *from* which they in turn are derived. Thus a clash of arguments and a clash of cymbals are not seen to have something in common only after the disembodied idea of a “clash” is abstracted from the one and from the other, and found – aha! – to be similar; it is rather that these experiences...are felt in our embodied selves as sharing a common nature (2010: 117).

“Metaphor *embodies* thought,” McGilchrist concludes, “and places it in a living *context*” (2010: 118). It “preserve[s] the link between language and the world it refers to” (118), and it does so “kinaesthetically.”

It shouldn't be too hard to see how the work of McGilchrist might be relevant to the typed communication of classical autistics, who remain so very connected to the actual world, no matter how much they might struggle with sensory and movement issues. If the right hemisphere is overactive in classical autism or even dominant, or if it performs tasks ordinarily performed by its partner, then sensorially immediate metaphorizing might follow. To be sure, Bissonnette's metaphorizing is unremitting. Like waves at the beach, the figures come at the reader steadily. But aren't these metaphors far-fetched? the reader might ask. Aren't they at times ridiculous? I have already presented any number of his imaginative comparisons, but let me present a few more:

All of my paintings require wooden frames which are put together like ordered, partly prepared salads, created assembly line fashion in gourmet food stores ending up elegantly presented at art show openings. I preach precision when lassoing wood pieces together (*My Classic Life* 2005).

Larry practiced with good applicators of technique of FC. However, posterizing best practices of FC didn't spread like wildfire. Leisurely stroll through park, approach to technique of FC predominated, similar to the lobbing of new baseballs by screen stars at baseball games (Bissonnette 2001b).

Spending lots of time on tedious processes of clarifying validity issues and studies will lose trainees' interest in working on approaching communication as an answer to self-esteem development. Teasing interests in technical side of FC is like treasure hunting with little, pacing children. Your savior will be placing learners in captive positions in front of independence movie, always serving popcorn and soda (Bissonnette 2001b).

Wooden frames like prepared salads? Lassoed wood pieces? Strolling FC? Undisciplined technique, like the first pitch at a baseball game by a Hollywood celebrity? New users of FC like little pacing children awaiting a treasure hunt? Could more disparate vehicles be employed to convey the various tenors?

In a chapter about an autistic poet from her sadly pathologizing and patronizing book, *Bright Splinters of the Mind: A Personal Story of Research with Autistic Savants*, Beate Hermelin concedes that the “less contextual and the more open to various interpretations a metaphor is, the greater the possibility of its evoking complex mental processes” (2001: 60) and, further, that the “least obvious, least stereotyped references will result in the most powerful poetic effects” (2001: 61). [18] Bissonnette’s metaphors clearly evoke complex mental processes, and clearly they are not at all stereotyped. The question is: are these metaphors apt? Do they come to seem inevitable—at once surprising and crucially necessary? Or is this the wrong question? For what we have been analyzing is something like poetry but not yet a poem.

Rather than thinking of these figures as far-fetched, we might think of them as far-fetching: the sensing body on foot beyond the furthest reaches of town, the sensing mind discovering and naming the world through relation. The point is to re-stitch what has been ripped apart, made arbitrarily distinct and separate. In the capital of Iowa we boast a “living history” farm, replete with costumes and time-specific farming implements. Why not living poetry, striding metaphor, but without the costumes? Why not the world as processual painting: perception’s freedom march? We might conceive of Bissonnette’s metaphorizing as a kind of thought-feeling neuro-cosmopolitanism, a witty and relentless globalization of the mind made possible by the legacy of FC’s typed massage. To play with the subtitle of Serres’ *The Five Senses*, what we encounter in Bissonnette is a philosophy of mingled bodies in a moving and thoroughly mingled world.

## Coda: Get Quiet Crazy Bird

Lest the reader think Bissonnette incapable of writing poetry, here is an actual poem by him:

Macaw  
That macaw speaks like a tape with a seam.  
Get quiet crazy bird.  
Too loud you are.  
Can't you mean to say less by posing as a silent film star?  
Acting foolish can only make trouble.  
Wake-up for gabbing when the zoo needs a tacky sideshow!  
(Inclusion Institutes n.d).

The poem finds in the image of that very colorful, new world parrot a figure for the autistic painter who knows something of institutionalized living. The work is subtly synesthetic, as we are asked to ponder the relationship between sight and sound in a poem written by a painter. The disparate analogical referents have been made to fit, which is to say that a specific context (poetry) has been exploited. The clear social awareness and witty indirection astonish. That the bird is nearly extinct seems to lurk behind the poem, resonating with the oppression of people who are neurologically different. The implied analogy of a silent film star points not only to a more hospitable medium for nonspeaking people, one in which speech is irrelevant, but also, conversely, to the role of technology in making synthetic speech possible. And while the poem clearly deprecates the oral language production of the classical autistic, comparing the characteristic echolalia, in another technological metaphor, to a broken tape, it saves its real venom for the effects of what might be called, adapting Rosemarie Garland Thomson's phrase, an "economy of auditory difference" (Thomson 1997). [19] The intense investment in normative behavior generates the need to stare and incarcerate, to demonize departures from neurotypicality exactly as it renders them objects of fascination. Hence, the metaphorical zoo and "tacky sideshow." Bissonnette pits the celebrity of the silent film star against this sort of attention, imagining a dynamic and accomplished role for himself (and others like him) in the public sphere.



The poem is very clever. It analogically condenses all sorts of things, and in giving us an image of the painterly poet—maybe even the painted poet—Bissonnette allows us to see something like the cross-wired body of the arts: a kind of autistic new media in which an autistic, with the help of a computer and a facilitator, brushes on gobs and gobs of metaphor to create his “muralistic lettered view of life.” Who knows what might happen if classical autistics laid repeated claim to writing poems? Who knows what might happen if neurotypicals practiced a more sense-based approach in their own work, to say nothing of allowing poetry to spill into the conversational quotidian? Each side of the neurological divide ought to be given appropriate instruction and therapies; each side ought to grab its neurological passport. “Promising strides of valiant” await.

## Notes

[1] Larry Bissonnette wrote the screenplay. Bissonnette also recently appeared in the widely distributed documentary, *Wretches and Jabberers*.

[2] In his book, *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, Biklen included a number of Bissonnette’s paintings, and he asked Bissonnette to write some short commentaries on them. When I use the word “commentary,” I am referring to these writings, which Biklen does not analyze. I am especially grateful to Dr. Biklen for allowing me to reproduce three of the photographs of Bissonnette’s paintings that appear in his book and to the Syracuse University Copy Center for making digital copies of these photographs.

[3] Parts of this particularly commentary show up in *My Classic Life as an Artist*. This is true of parts of some of Bissonnette’s other writings, which also appear in the film as elements of the screenplay.

[4] The notion of an obdurate literality in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) persists in the scientific literature. The inability to comprehend figurative language, particularly metaphor, is often cited as a debilitating aspect of this condition, and it is presumed to be especially severe in those labeled “low functioning.” In her essay “Understanding Minds and Metaphors: Insights from the Study of Figurative Language in Autism,” Francesca Happé lays out the case, linking the problem with metaphoric comprehension to impaired theory of mind (Happé 1995). In her view, autistics suffer from an inability to relate to objects or people and to understand the value of relation. This view has become so prominent that a popular novel—*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*—Ralph James Savarese. “Gobs and Gobs of Metaphor.” *Inflexions* 5, “Simondon: 216 Milieu, Techniques, Aesthetics” (March 2012). 184-223. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org)

makes metaphoric bafflement a central aspect of the protagonist's characterization. Even literary scholars in the field of disability studies have reproduced this stereotype. As Ato Quayson, in his recent book *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, puts it, following Simon Baron-Cohen, "In lower functioning autism the autistic understands almost no metaphors, so everything is taken literally" (2007: 152).

[5] Autie-type is the term I use for the linguistic production of generally non-speaking people with autism, people who need text-to-voice synthesizers to communicate. See Savarese 2008.

[6] Tito Mukhopadhyay speaks about writing poetry in exactly this way. In an interview with him entitled "More Than a Thing to Ignore," I asked, "Does reading poetry calm your anxiety? If so, what kind? Does it need to rhyme, be metrical? Does *writing* poetry alleviate anxiety? Earlier you spoke of poetry giving you a "secure feeling." Mukhopadhyay responded, "A rhyme is a very linear auditory experience. And so is the beat – be it in tetrameter or in pentameter. It arouses the cortical mind with certain meaningful language experience and arouses the subcortical mind with the expectation of the mechanical beat that is offered by the lines of the poem. Anxiety is subcortical. Anxiety gets diluted by the experience. That is what makes it soothing. In my book *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?* I have written about a link between the auditory experience and a motor learning process of tying my shoelaces. The anxiety of some new learning process gets diluted with those stories about colorful strings" (Savarese 2010a).

[7] See Oliver Sacks' profile of Temple Grandin in *An Anthropologist on Mars* for a description of this machine, which Grandin devised and constructed after extrapolating from her long experience with cattle. She found that she could lessen their anxiety and facilitate easy, purposeful movement by employing rounded chutes that hugged them. The principle of deep pressure is key here. See Sacks 1996.

[8] Manning also speaks of "develop[ing] skeletal structures for relational improvisation through sound, skin, textiles, movement, architecture, and new media" (2009a: 2). Metaphor, I suggest, is just such a "structure for relational improvisation," and it depends on what Manning calls the "sensing body in movement" (2009a: 6).

[9] Though the study by Koshino et al. doesn't mention Applied Behavior Analysis, it's clear that ABA is not the kind of therapy the authors recommend. ABA focuses on reducing inappropriate behaviors, not on improving brain connectivity. For this and other reasons, the vast majority of self-advocates vigorously oppose ABA. See (Koshino et al. 2005).

[10] Specifically see Mukhopadhyay's poem "Those Birds" (Mukhopadhyay 2010).

[11] Brian Massumi's book *Parables of the Virtual* has influenced my thinking considerably, as the latter sections of this chapter make clear, and the neurodiversity movement has much to learn from it. His attention to how the senses produce the real makes room for other generated realities that need not be pathologized. By showing the virtual aspect of all sensory experience, he levels the neurological playing field, and he invites us to reflect on other sensory possibilities. Consider this passage about vision; notice how it puts enormous pressure on a central, contrived distinction: "If vision is always contaminated, at the very least by multisense pastness, then the answer to the question of why waking...bodies do not hallucinate has to be reviewed. Or rather, the blanket assumption that they do not hallucinate needs rethinking.... What is actually seen is productively added to it: *overseen*. Objects of vision are added ingredients to experience: experienced oversights or excess seeings. In a word, hallucinations. This is in no way to imply that they are unreal or simply illusory. Quite the opposite, the conclusion is that hallucination is as real as any thing. More radically, hallucination—the spontaneously creative addition of objects of perception that are not found preformed 'out there'—is generative of reality (more reality). Vision gives back more to reality than it is given. It is not possible to sustain a strict distinction between perception and hallucination" (Massumi 2002: 154). With respect to classical autism, a crucial question emerges. If "multisense pastness" intrudes much less in classical autism, as a result of the autistic's intense attention to detail (or what the experts call "local" as opposed to "global" coherence), then what is the status of what is seen, heard, touched, tasted, etc.? Put differently, how to reconcile classical autism's relatively pure sensory knowing with the obvious scrambling of input that so many autistics speak about?

[12] See *Sensory Integration and the Child* by Jean Ayres. She writes, "Very heavy touch-pressures is the kind of tactile stimulation that often produces a positive response in the autistic child. He may like to lie between two mats and have something heavy—like a large bolster—rolled over him" (Ayres 1979: 125).

[13] Jamie Burke deserves his own essay, and indeed the book I'm writing has a chapter devoted to him. As if to prove the link between movement and speech, when Jamie learned to speak, not only did he first need to type what he spoke, but he also couldn't read aloud *anything* that he hadn't produced with his own hand. Eventually he learned how to read texts that he hadn't physically authored, though even now, when anxious, he prefers to type his thoughts before speaking them, as he did recently in an Iowa Public Radio interview with me.

[14] See Donnellan et al. 2010 for a detailed discussion of motor problems in classical autism. Any number of studies has shown irregularities in the basal ganglia of autistics. See, for example, Rinehart, Nicole J., et al. 2006.

[15] See, for example, Zelan 2003: 48.

[16] For a discussion of right-hemispheric processing in classical autism see Savarese 2008.

[17] In *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move*, Mukhopadhyay writes of learning how to put a puzzle together by privately reciting a verse in his head: "I was getting a kind of rhythm to the whole operation. As if in my mind someone was reciting the words, 'Break them up/There we go,/One, two, three, and...four,/Put them back/Place by place,/One, two, three, and...FOUR!' My fingers were timed to the word 'four.' As I timed my action to the rhythm, it seemed to get more and more easy. My hands began to be sure of the fact that I could pick up the fourth piece at the prompt, 'four.' ...I recited the mental verse over and over again, as my hands followed the beat" (2008: 149).

[18] Hermelin views her subject, a young woman named Kate, as having produced such figures in the explicit context of writing poetry, and yet she can't help but disparage the accomplishment: "But even with her limited grasp and ability to search consciously for such representations..." (2004: 61), Hermelin writes; "In a minor, modest way, and in spite of her poems' limitations..." (2004: 62), she repeats. Why bother to explore the apparent paradox of *disability* if you're only going to use your subject's impairment to undercut that ability?

[19] In her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosmarie Garland Thomson uses the phrase "an economy of visual difference" to underscore how departures from a celebrated norm invite the kind of staring that demeans and marginalizes the physically disabled (Thomson 1997).

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