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Autistic Disturbances

Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe

Julia Miele Rodas

Foreword by Melanie Yergeau

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Foreword

by Melanie Yergeau

What does it mean, Julia Miele Rodas asks, to open a text to the “possibilities of autism”? If autism is a potential toward which one might aspire, how might clinical-textual readings of autism shift—crumble—strive?

It is hard for a foreword to do justice to a book as profound as this one. *Autistic Disturbances* is at once capacious and nuanced: It demarcates the *whatness* of autistic language—an impressive and formidable project—while refusing to confine its substance to pathological categories. *Autistic Disturbances* unfurls autistic language not as a category attached to a diagnosis, but rather as a series of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that share deep affinities with autistic cultures. Autistic language, per Rodas, is uniquely embodied and habitual. These body-habits, as it were, exceed the domain of the contemporarily- and culturally-autistic and are locatable across literary texts from the past three centuries. With keen wit and a penetrating gaze (eye contact pun!), Rodas shows us how textual habits historically devalued as autistic are habits traditionally valued in literary texts. Indeed, if one were to spend six hours with *Silva Rhetoricae*'s trope index, one would find many an autistic-cum-literary pattern. For what are rhetorical schemes if not autistic, and vice versa? In pursuing these questions, Rodas describes autistic language as “terminological clouds” (which is a much cooler metaphor than Kenneth Burke’s terministic screens), taxonomies that resonate as much as they create friction. Autistic language, she notes, is not confinable to tidy or monolithic categories; like literary motifs, it rains and patterns.

Readers familiar with autism studies will understand the complexity (and guaranteed controversy) surrounding any claim about autism and language. Language is, after all, what the autistic are time and again claimed to lack. Indeed, even when autistic communication bears passing normative resemblance, clinicians without fail locate fault. We have at our disposal nearly infinite clinical tropes that frame autistic languaging effectually as non-languaging: Absence of speech. Presence of augmentative and assistive communication. Failure to point or gesture. Pointing or gesturing too much, and with too much enjoyment, and with too much of the too much too much. Excessive repetition. Inexcessive repetition. Oversharing. Undersharing. Inability to answer “How are you?” Propensity to answer “How are you?” with train trivia or decontextualized lines from *Die Hard*. Et cetera x 47.

Rodas’s book is a welcoming middle finger, if one can imagine the beckoning playfulness of such a discordant gesture. Where a clinician finds paucity, Rodas finds semiotic silence. Where a clinician finds TMI, Rodas finds apostrophe or ejaculation. In reading *Autistic Disturbances*, I am reminded of Neil Marcus’s claim that disability “is an art . . . an ingenious way to live.” Rodas masterfully makes the case that autism is an art, one that publics are beholden to recognize and value. More than this, however, she refuses those claims that would suggest autism and autistics have no language. In so doing, Rodas rejects ableist repertoires of what language is and can mean, notably the understanding that language necessitates understanding or intelligibility. In venerating the idiosyncratic and the echolalic, Rodas conducts analyses of literary texts notable for their autistic form *by means of an autistic form*. In other words, when discussing interruptive prose, Rodas interrupts her own prose—beautifully, rigidly, and impassionedly. In this way, readers are viscerally confronted with autism’s many possibilities, are given neurodivergent mechanisms through which to re-see *Villette*, *Frankenstein*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and more.

Autism’s possibilities exceed the texts Rodas autistically scrutinizes. What *Autistic Disturbances* offers is at once a method and a style for apprehending aesthetic autism, across genre and mode. This is an incomparable book, one brimming with ideas for how to reclaim autistic echoes in a morass of literary expression. Lather, rinse, repeat is an amazing thing.

Preface

Involuntarity and Intentionality

Autistic Disturbances is about autism poetics, about the particular ways in which autism is expressed in language. The book brings together literary, linguistic, political, and clinical discussion to explore the presence of autistic voice in familiar texts and to question the complex matrices of power and aesthetics that influence how formal autistic expression is valued or devalued. The argument and theoretical framework of *Autistic Disturbances* are unfolded at length in its opening chapters; the shorter chapters that make up the rest of the book apply this interpretive experiment to a series of well-known texts. What follows in this preface is a brief discussion of possible questions surrounding the larger project.

Regarding Language and Intentionality

In the beginning, there is a question of intention:

Is it ever truly possible to say entirely what we mean or to mean entirely what we say? Does language, used by anyone in any form, exist as a fully intentional medium, transparently communicative, a direct expressive conduit of some true inner self?

By presenting the question in these extreme terms, with these abundant flourishes—*ever, truly, entirely, fully, transparently*—the question itself is under-

mined, not really a question at all. This is what's called in the business a "rhetorical" question, a deliberate spoiler, the answer already obvious.

And the obvious answer? Of course language is difficult, contingent, and experimental; of course, there is only ever the illusion of clear, unidimensional meaning. Language is always approximate, always loaded, always a little unpredictable.

Despite this concession, when considering autistic language, there remains nevertheless a tendency to persevere on questions of intentionality; there is a recurring critique, a zombie-like rising up again of that which might have been considered securely settled, obvious. Intentions are always, at best, obscure and illusory. And yet, as Melanie Yergeau observes, "involuntariness dominates much of the discourse on autism, underlying clinical understandings of affect, intention, and socially appropriate response" just as "popular autism narratives represent autistics as involuntary" (*Authoring Autism*, 7, 9). Thus, the inevitable ambiguities of neurotypical language users are passed over, invisible; there may be misspeaking, confusion, the muddiness of figuring out, of thinking-out-loud—all this is to be expected. But with ordinary language use, there is all the while an unspoken, unconscious expectation of teleology, a social generosity that infers destination; the language that is valued is language that is thought to be getting somewhere. Meanwhile, autistic speakers and writers are subject to a different kind of verbal scrutiny, an expectation of "solipsism" (Nadesan, "Constructing Autism," 87), of "echolalia" (Hinerman, *Teaching Autistic Children*, 25), of "nonsense" (Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances," 243). Autistic language is "attenuated" and "circular" (Glastonbury, "I'll Teach You Differences," 60; Olsen, "Diagnosing Fantastic Autism," 41); it is, as Marion Glastonbury poetically sums up, "the empty institutional whelk-shell without the hermit crab" (60). Autistic language is always suspect because autistic people are always suspected. Indeed, the question of intentionality is informed by another question, deeper and darker than the first: When it comes to autism, perhaps, there is no there, there? Yergeau is careful to unpack this latency: "Involuntariness," she notes, "is a project of dehumanization" (*Authoring Autism*, 10).

It is imperative that this caution be foregrounded, that discussion of autism and language never lose sight of an implicit "project of dehumanization." And yet there is also something to be gained from undertaking discovery at this boundary, from experimental probing at the site of absence. To this end, this preface puts forward a brief analysis of a text that genuinely isn't there, teasing out the threads of autism poetics

and recurring questions of intentionality in a manuscript that is literally nonexistent—the fictional “Memorial” authored by Mr. Dick in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850).

First: about Mr. Dick. He’s a provoking figure for thinking about autism, partly because, as a character, he is balanced ambiguously at the threshold of legitimate personhood. He is regarded by the clear-sighted and heroic Betsey Trotwood as a font of wisdom and common sense, treasured by the novel’s protagonist as a generous and tenderhearted friend, and understood by scholars as a doppelganger for Dickens himself. (Mr. Dick, get it?) At the same time, audiences understand from their first encounter with the character that he is socially, emotionally, and intellectually atypical. He lives upstairs in Aunt Betsey’s house, having been preserved by her from institutionalization by his own brother. Though Mr. Dick is fully capable of managing his physical needs independently, he is nevertheless subject to Aunt Betsey’s authority, seemingly unable to take care of himself, a borderline case, marked as intellectually or cognitively disabled, a legitimate subject for incarceration, inhabiting the fringe of the human family. Though he is articulate, an able and productive writer, his words likewise are regarded as failing in some way; “there was something wrong” (Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 243; chap. 15). In keeping with clinical descriptions of autism, the strangenesses of Mr. Dick’s language are almost imperceptible; it is “hard to find anything formally wrong, rather the reader is left with an overall impression of oddness” (Happé, “Autobiographical Writings,” 229).

Mr. Dick’s potential identity as a neurocognitively disabled character is important, of course, in considering questions of intentionality, but it is his role as an arguably neuroqueer writer, his production of apparently autistic text, which is the focus here. It is Mr. Dick’s manuscript, endlessly attenuated, both inaccessible and inescapable, redolent of autistic rhetoric, that captures the imagination. The writing that Mr. Dick works at diligently every day is explicitly called a “Memorial,” but Dickens remains rather vague as to its content. In fact, the defining feature of the Memorial is that it must perpetually be stopped and restarted because, somehow, the decapitated head of King Charles the First continually reappears in the manuscript as an unbidden interjection, a scripted interruption or ejaculation, impermissible. (Another intrusion here of Dickensian writerly identity—King *Charles*, get it?—signals the import of what might otherwise be considered an expletive.)

This Sisyphean task, this ceaseless circular writing—echoing, ricocheting, evoking Glastonbury’s “empty institutional whelk-shell”—is also

punctuated by Mr. Dick's crafting his infinite pages of waste manuscript into enormous kites, which he flies with the idea of "disseminating" his words into the wind (244; chap. 15). Mr. Dick's is a life of false starts and his escape from institutional life is ambiguous at best, since he is rescued from the asylum only to suffer a kind of writer's incarceration, chained to the incomprehensible treadmill of the Memorial. His writing life appears to be one of constant reiteration, senseless interruption, meaningless proliferation, and pointless dissemination, an attempt at meaning-making punctuated at intervals by symbolic but indecipherable decapitation. Language without meaning, suggestive of Lance Olsen's comment that autism-inflected texts are "fraught with . . . a deep feeling of failure [and] invariably begin the entropic drift toward autistic silence. The game is futile, the center is absent, linguistic zero is present" (41). Mr. Dick's writing operates at the margins of intentionality, a point brought home by the fact that he later transitions from the Memorial into work as a law copyist, anticipating, or becoming an uncanny forebear of Melville's famed Bartleby, the scrivener. Work on the text of the Memorial, an outpouring of creative interiority, merges explicitly into writing work that is the mere copying of dry legal documents.

Ostensibly, Mr. Dick's Memorial, then, is a text about nothing and meaning nothing, void, contentless, of purely formal or superficial value, a pointless activity to give occupation to the most marginal of figures: "it don't signify," comments Aunt Betsey; "it keeps him employed" (232; chap. 14). Like the legal copying to come, the Memorial may be regarded as a mechanical, a mechanistic performance, without interiority or intentionality. Dovetailing with clinical assessments of autism in the 20th century, it is the "mechanical repetition" noted in the *DSM III-R*, Kanner's "monotonous repetitiousness" ("Autistic Disturbances," 246). And yet the Memorial's profusion and its expansive echoes within and beyond the novel belie its apparent insignificance. Mr. Dick's writing, despite appearances, is not meaningless or nonsensical. His kite flying is not intended to get rid of the words and ideas that constrain him, a means of relieving himself of a kind of semiotic waste, but is rather founded on his "belief in its disseminating the statements pasted on [the kite]" (244; chap. 15). "I don't know where they may come down," he remarks. "It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth; but I take my chance of that" (229; chap. 14). While others question his cognitive competence and set restrictions on the content and manner of his writing, Mr. Dick's kite-flying activity is undertaken to spread the statements of the Memorial far and wide; it is his version

of publication, of broadcast, an expansive sharing of dense, difficult, and forbidden language.

And while the text itself is absent, it is not completely unknowable. What it intends, whether it has legitimate intentionality, to what extent its meaning and intention are communicable, are not quite accessible. And yet, nonexistent though it is, it is still possible to look at this vacancy, to regard its absent impressions—its footprints and fingerprints and other evidence of its nonexistent existence—and to ask as part of the present investigation whether intention is really the right question after all. “Closely and laboriously written,” Mr. Dick’s hand is an outward sign of the dense interiority of the writing; like David’s writing, and like Dickens’s, Mr. Dick’s text is “a Memorial about his own history” (232; chap. 14), a storytelling so distinct and particular that its expression challenges the parameters of convention, flirting with incomprehensibility. Lamenting the unprocessable but relentless presence of King Charles the First’s head in his understanding and articulation of his own life, Mr. Dick wonders aloud, “how could the people about him have made that mistake of putting some of the trouble out of *his* head, after it was taken off, into *mine*?” (228; chap. 14). He recognizes that this peculiar sign will not clearly communicate its meaning to a prospective reader, that this idiosyncratic form of expression, this distinctive inventive articulation is a kind of communicative failure, and he is troubled that he “never can get that quite right” and “never can make that perfectly clear” (229; chap. 14). But Mr. Dick seems equally certain that this symbol is central to his own written life and he finds it impossible to avoid the reference. David tells us that “Mr. Dick had been for upwards of ten years endeavoring to keep King Charles the First out of the Memorial; but he had been constantly getting into it, and was there now” (232; chap. 14). The Memorial is deeply, intensely, inescapably subjective, reliant on forms of verbal invention that are meaningful without being transparently communicative or transactional.

Finally, the persistence of King Charles the First’s head in Mr. Dick’s life writing is suggestive of the dangerous volatility of his language. Despite Aunt Betsey’s firm insistence that “there shan’t be a word about it in his Memorial” (231; chap. 14), the head constantly rears its head. Mr. Dick cannot or will not be constrained from this form of ejaculation, from writing what is forbidden, inappropriate, impolite, politically and socially explosive. Aunt Betsey recognizes the validity of Mr. Dick’s expressive choice—“That’s his allegorical way of expressing it. He connects his illness with great disturbance and agitation, naturally, and that’s

the figure, or the simile, or whatever it's called, which he chooses to use. And why shouldn't he, if he thinks proper!" (231; chap. 14)—but she sees at the same time the unspeakability of Mr. Dick's experience and moves to censor his language as she has successfully silenced herself on the unspeakable subject of her estranged husband's brutality. "It's not a business-like way of speaking,' said my aunt, 'nor a worldly way. I am aware of that; and that's the reason why I insist upon it, that there shan't be a word about it in his Memorial'" (231; chap. 14). Like other autistic expression, the Memorial is dangerously outspoken; and like other neuroqueer text, it is continually censored and silenced, finding a voice only in seemingly obscure and privative forms of sharing—dissemination, for instance, by kite.

The ejaculations and tics and decapitated heads that may find their way into autistic expression may not be a business-like way of speaking, nor even reliably intentional symbolic devices, but like the intermittent *squawks* and *dahlia*s and *cheeses* visited in the chapters ahead, they are expressive verbalizations worth encountering. "An autistic may not fully intend to wave her arms or repeat license plate numbers," Yergeau points out, "and yet an embodied intentionality inheres in those moments, creating meaning and harnessing energy out of a not-entirely-meant performance" (Authoring Autism, 65). The Memorial, even in its absence, offers a solid interpretive lesson, its authorial echoes—Charles Dickens, Charles the First, Mr. Dick—and its circularity and its interrupted quality, all serving to remind that valuable expressive resonances may erupt unbidden. This is not to argue that the author and the character and the decapitated head are all the same; or that Donald T., reciting "Dahlia, dahlia, dahlia," is the same as Gertrude Stein writing "guided guided away, guided and guided away" (Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances," 219; Stein, Gertrude Stein, 133). Instead, it is an argument for respectful, open listening and reading, an argument against the defensive armor implicit in questions of intentionality, and an argument for leaning into "solipsism," "echolalia," and "nonsense," even if it's not a business-like way of speaking.

A Note on Terminology

As *Autistic Disturbances* plays at these margins, exploring potential autistic resonances and sampling autistic potentialities in a variety of texts, it employs terms meant to privilege an aesthetics of fluidity and ambiguity.

Among these terms, “neuroqueer” figures prominently. Adopted from an established community of autistic writers and thinkers, including Ibbly Grace and Melanie Yergeau, *neuroqueer* gestures toward a cultural history shared by neurodivergent and queer peoples and speaks to overlaps of identity and experiences of (resistance to) forced compliance. Readers interested in a more expansive exploration of this history and use of this term are urged to read Yergeau’s outstanding *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (2017). Use of “queer” and “neuroqueer” in the present text are embraced not only as an act of intellectual solidarity and in recognition of the autistic writers who have influenced my own thinking, but also because of the ways this terminology underscores political, social, and aesthetic aspects of autistic identity. Just as *queer* reclaims epithet, *neuroqueer* redefines and reclaims identity from clinical and popular arenas that demean, dismiss, malign, and infantilize. Neuroqueer is decidedly a cultural site, not a diagnosis.

This book also favors use of the word “autist” in speaking of autistic individuals, though it uses some variety to indicate flexibility and diversity around nominal preferences. Informed by Jim Sinclair’s widely disseminated argument, *Autistic Disturbances* deliberately avoids use of the “person with autism” construction (“Why I Dislike ‘Person First’ Language”). As with other marginalized identities, however, active efforts at politically conscious language are directed toward a moving target. As long as the people named continue to struggle for power and agency within the dominant culture, terminology will necessarily continue to shift as part of this process. I apologize to future readers if the politically conscious terms adopted here come to be regarded as blighted ableist language. I am sorry, likewise, if I have mistakenly misgendered any of the sources referenced in this book; in its use of pronouns, *Autistic Disturbances* works on some level to disturb conventional expectations around autism and masculinity and it makes a conscious effort to respect preferred pronouns when they are known, but it is otherwise grounded primarily in traditional gendered pronoun use.

Autism Histories and Privileging Autistic Voice

The work of *Autistic Disturbances* is to explore in depth the particularities and possibilities of autistic language. To that end, it draws on literary criticism and clinical theory, but, mindful of the extent to which autistic voices have been silenced, the book seeks to foreground autistic speak-

ing, sometimes in ways that readers may find unexpected or challenging. One formal feature that may require explanation is the way words and phrases autistically picked from various contexts have been used to punctuate the writing, a practical application of poetic, aesthetic, and analytical technique, an acting out the ways in which echo, echoes, echolalia can productively ricochet. These repetitions are autistically interruptive, ejaculatory, distracting, perseverative, a kind of verbal embroidery that persistently challenges typical verbal intentionality; but this repetitive accrual of autistic ejaculation is also a performance of the irregular and unexpected ways in which language may make meaning. This formal gesture seeds the entire volume with authentic autistic speaking, but it is also a playful demonstration of the autistic tenor this book seeks to celebrate. Close readers of the book as a whole are likely to recognize these repetitions, since each is first quoted and documented within the body of the text; repeated words and phrases are not documented as they recur in later iterations, but each is collected and referenced in “An Accounting: Autistic Ejaculations” at the end of the book.

Privileging autistic voice and aesthetic also means that *Autistic Disturbances* focuses on autistic language and ideas about autistic language in particular, sometimes passing over important clinical or social history with the scantiest gloss. For those who want to learn more about the history of autism or autism’s culture wars, about the emergence of and contested discourse around prominent figures like Leo Kanner, Hans Asperger, Bruno Bettelheim, Ivar Lovaas, and Uta Frith, or the frictions surrounding *Autism Speaks*, there is a wealth of excellent material. I would recommend as a first resource online sites like the one managed by ASAN (the Autistic Self Advocacy Network) and blogs by autistic activists; among these, I suggest Lydia X. Z. Brown’s *Autistic Hoya*, Dani Alexis Ryskamp’s *Autistic Academic*, Bev Harp’s *Square 8*, and Melanie Yergeau’s *Autistry*. In addition to Yergeau’s *Authoring Autism*, recommended books include Stuart Murray’s highly accessible *Autism* (2012), Anne McGuire’s award-winning *War on Autism* (2016), and Adam Feinstein’s meticulous *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers* (2010).