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AESTHETICS, POETICS, AND COGNITION:
A NEW MINOR LITERATURE BY AUTISTS AND MODERNISTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation begins by recognizing that many texts written at the end of the twentieth century by individuals with autism spectrum disorders share distinctive aesthetic and poetic characteristics with experimental modernist texts. Despite the literary significance ascribed to modernism, texts in both genres are still characterized in terms of lack—when literature by autists is analyzed at all. They are often treated as incoherent collections of juxtaposed fragments, which depict isolated protagonists struggling to unify their experience. This perspective is reminiscent of Uta Frith’s theory of weak central coherence, which pathologizes autists for the way that they process information. Frith’s theory and the critical maxim that modernist texts are “fragmented” are both revealed as ideologies that flatten the texts and people that they are used to analyze. They restrict the spatial relationships possible among these texts, the elements of which they are composed, and their environments.

To reorient such discussions, this dissertation takes a methodological approach grounded in post-structuralism and disability studies. These theoretical areas equip readers to abandon claims of “incoherence” and instead chart multidimensional textual maps, which reveal ever more lines of flight. Specifically, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of a minor literature provides a framework that facilitates the analysis of contact among texts by authors from T.S. Eliot to Tito Mukhopadhyay. Less restricted by temporal boundaries than most, this literary category also depends less on a writer’s identity than a minority literature. Alternatively, a minor literature attends to the way writers subordinate a major language’s communicative function to experiments with the materials of which it is composed. It is from this perspective that authors in a minor literature become “strangers” to language. These authors interrupt cognitive processing through literary style, which is a means of joining disparate elements.

Rather than juxtaposing texts by modernists and autists, this dissertation considers them *adjacently* as both contiguous and continuous: “always in contact...but also always repelled.” An adjacent reading gives readers access to new spatial relationships that reveal new possibilities in environments that otherwise appear arid.

Overall, this project performs the kind of textual reorganization that Eliot lauds in “The Function of Criticism” (1923) by “review[ing] the past of our literature, and set[ting] the poets and the poems in a new order” to accommodate “new and strange objects in the foreground.” It reassesses the relationship between foreground and background to accommodate texts that give their characters and readers access to spaces in which alternative relationships are possible.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: A New Minor Literature¹

Why read texts written by individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first with experimental modernist literature from the interwar period? This is the question on which the next three chapters focus as they lay out convergences in the texts' aesthetics and poetics, along with the affordances of this particular comparative approach for the study of both genres. Such a comparison is difficult, in part because both "autism" and "modernism" are constantly shifting terms, which is why I lay out the history of both terms at the beginning of chapters two and three, respectively. Before addressing the question with which this paragraph opens, however, it seems necessary to clarify the meaning and relevance of "aesthetics" to this project.

First, it is important to distinguish "aesthetics" from both the more general "form" and the more specific "poetics," as Samuel Otter does. Aesthetics focuses on the value accorded to particular works of art based on the sensory experience (typically, pleasure) that they give the audience. According to Raymond Williams, the term goes back to Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750-8) and derives from the Greek *aisthesis*, which referred primarily to "material things...things perceptible by the senses, as distinct from things which were immaterial or which could only be thought" (31). Though Immanuel Kant's later use of "aesthetics" diverges somewhat—aesthetics is not necessarily aligned with beauty—the focus continues to be on sensory perception. Later discussions of aesthetics either implicitly or explicitly draw on these texts in addition to

those by Georg Hegel, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel, along with more contemporary work by Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

As Baumgarten recognized, the study of aesthetics is intensely personal because it is based on individual responses to works of art—the subjective as opposed to the objective, which is often conflated with the collective. It brings a “human dimension” to the interpretation of art, according to Williams (32), which Tobin Siebers defines more specifically: aesthetics has an “underlying corporeality,” in that “[t]he human body is both the subject and object of aesthetic production” (1). Such humanity is often lost in the assumption that humans experience sensations in essentially the same way—and if they do not, there is something wrong with them. Another complication in this experience is that “we think the pleasures we take and the judgments we make are entirely our own, but they also are the products of a market and a culture that we imagine to be outside of us” (Otter 121). Therefore, aesthetic decisions are made on the basis of a complex interplay between the individual and the collective, whose influence we often do not recognize we learn to ignore the interconnection of inside and outside: “Readers are trained to see, and they also discern with their own peculiar eyes” (122). As Otter recognizes, though, “[w]e seldom pause and reflect on our formal preferences and aesthetic commitments” (122). This dissertation takes the obligation to reflect seriously, proposing several reasons why it benefits us to think critically about aesthetics and the way that aesthetic judgments can limit our appreciation of particular texts and experiences.

“Form” is related to but different from aesthetics. It refers to the shape that a text takes, the way in which it is composed. Since its etymological origin, this term has focused on a body’s outward appearance, but it makes no direct reference to judgments

about this form, as aesthetics does. “Poetics” is again similar but different, referring to the way that language itself is used in a text, the words authors choose and the way that they are positioned in relation to each other. “Aesthetics” can be applied to all kinds of art, whereas “poetics” is restricted to language-based art. More than “form,” “poetics” also captures the principles behind a particular formal construction, as Aristotle’s *Poetics* does. Though people often assume “poetics” refers only to poetry, one can also study the poetics present in or that informs a different genre, following Aristotle.

In the field of disability studies, Tobin Siebers coined the term “disability aesthetics” to refer to an analytical approach that “embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken,” though he goes further, arguing that “it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result” (3). His text locates two ways in which attention drawn to disability can productively influence aesthetic histories: scholars can work “(1) to establish disability as a critical framework that questions the presuppositions underlying definitions of aesthetic production and appreciation; (2) to elaborate disability as an aesthetic value in itself worthy of future development” (3). This dissertation could be located under the auspices of disability aesthetics as it examines “how specific artists and works force us to reconsider fundamental aesthetic assumptions” (3); yet, it takes a slightly different approach. Rather than embracing broken beauty and “irregularity” (32), it questions the frame within which the work is judged to be broken. It also focuses on a much more limited context than Siebers does, looking at work by autists rather than work by artists with a variety of different kinds of disabilities.

This dissertation primarily uses the word “autist” as a form of person-first language to capture the experiences of individuals with ASDs. By avoiding the person

with insert-diagnosis-here model, it recognizes that ASDs are not illnesses; they reflect neurological differences that structure the way a person experiences herself and her environment. This word originally comes from Asperger's "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood" (1944), and it has an already established connection to artistry via Oliver Sacks's essay "The Autist Artist" (1970). Though it could be argued to elide differences between autists, this word does so in favor of recognizing their shared pattern of neural connectivity. Otherwise, the dissertation changes the labels it uses to capture the ways people define themselves and the ways autism has changed as a diagnosis over time. As a result, references to this diagnosis will be fluid, based on the context. For example, Bleuler's term "autism" is used when referring to it as a symptom of schizophrenia or as discussed by Kanner/Asperger and "autism spectrum disorder" (ASD) when referring to the diagnosis defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the *DSM-IV* and 5.

As part of their recent article "Surface Reading: An Introduction," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus propose an attitude of "willed, sustained proximity to the text" (10), and the ethics of this approach overlaps with both disability studies and also the attitude that the texts under analysis in this dissertation seek to foster. With this approach, a reader commits to remaining near a body that (s)he may have difficulty reading and may, therefore, not understand. Such an approach fosters an intimate relationship based not on the assumption of transparency, but instead on the inverse, obscurity—the recognition that *bodies are difficult to read* but that it is worth the effort to allow them to reveal themselves in their own time. Such contact likely contradicts the reader's preferences, but that is the point; it is given on the other's terms. It becomes what Marjorie Levinson calls "learned submission" (qtd. in Best and Marcus 14). Such a position rejects the belief that

the critic is “heroic,” as Fredric Jameson proposes in *The Political Unconscious*, and also that the best way to approach a text is as an adversary (Best and Marcus 5, 16). As Best and Marcus suggest in line with Levinson, “in submitting to the artwork, we come to share its freedom, by experiencing ‘the deep challenge that the artwork poses to ideology, or to the *flattening, routinizing, absorptive* effects associated with ideological regimes” (Levinson qtd. in 14, emphasis added). This dissertation shows two such flattening ideologies at work: Uta Frith’s theory of weak central coherence and the critical maxim that modernist texts are “fragmented.”

Yet, surface as a concept relies on some amount of flattening, and while Best and Marcus argue that “depth is not to be found outside the text or beneath its surface (as its context, horizon, unconscious, or history); rather, depth is *continuous with* surface” (11, emphasis added), bodies do present particular surfaces to the world. At least, we perceive these bodies as presenting such surfaces. Best and Marcus define “surface” as “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (9). Often lost in such discussion is the fact that what appears as surface changes depending on the context. Different people perceive surfaces in different ways at different moments in time. While the label “surface reading” makes these authors appear to work within the limitations of old terms—which lose their critical purchase through the authors’ analysis—it does recognize that in challenging flattening ideologies, texts and people are not free from them, as Levinson seems to suggest.

Chapter two begins by examining the interpretive frames that figures like Frith have applied to what can be called autists' "cognitive style." Originally from psychology, this term denotes "a recurring pattern of perceptual and intellectual activity" (Lavenda and Schultz), and all humans—not just autists—are unconsciously predisposed to adopt some patterns over others as a result of the way in which neurons are distributed in their brains. Cognitive style is one factor that influences the surfaces that are accessible to different people. The second chapter describes the cognitive style to which autists are predisposed in more detail, as represented by both scientists and autists themselves. It recognizes that autists, like most other people, can employ different cognitive styles if they have sufficient time and motivation, but also that scientific and medical practitioners have established the existence of neurotypically developing individuals, whose cognitive style is treated as the norm.

Instead of embracing existing terminology, this dissertation describes so-called neurotypicals as "neuro-normates." This word is an adaptation of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's influential term "normate" for this context. Garland-Thomson's term designates a social category that is constructed through its opposition to and separation from "an array of deviant others" (8). She recognizes that though it has great social power and cultural capital, very few people can occupy this position indefinitely, if ever. Adding the prefix *neuro-* restricts the position to situations in which people gain power through their comparative cognitive and neurological normalcy. In autism studies, the word "neurotypical" typically occupies this position; however, scientific research uses it with the assumption that most people *are* neurotypical. With "neuro-normate," I seek to

acknowledge a priori the constructed nature of this position and to question its representative power.

The cognitive style common among autists contributes to their production of images—and, I would argue, texts—that exhibit weak central coherence when judged from a perspective biased toward neuro-normates.² It predisposes them to prioritize stimuli that neuro-normates consider trivial and represent their environments with images that look disjointed to neuro-normates. Framed more constructively, autists distribute salience differently than others, assigning importance to different objects or stimuli and creating innovative connections among them. Autists may seem to lack the control that neuro-normates have over their cognitive processing, but analysis of literature written by authors like Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay and Craig Romkema demonstrates that the associations autists locate and the gestalts they produce are just as valuable as those with which neuro-normates are more familiar. Based on its treatment of Frith's theory as flat, this dissertation takes an approach adopted by many modernists: it recognizes that “the prevalent mode of discourse is by no means necessarily the legitimate one” (Eysteinnsson 59) and seeks to provoke a state of discursive crisis that will be familiar to readers of modernist literature.

This approach also encourages the integration of current terminology from the cognitive sciences into modernist studies via its prior application to texts written by autists. Part of the basis for this is that criticism of modernist and autistic aesthetics has used similar spatial language. Modernism is often distinguished by its attention to cognition, as manifested in the development of techniques like stream of consciousness. A term like “cognitive style”³ provides a sharper tool for integrating analysis of a text's

form and the attention that it pays to cognition than the more ambiguous “subjectivity” or “mind.” “Cognitive style” is closely related to other terms, including “intellectual style,” “mode of thinking,” and “mind style,”⁴ which are prevalent in psychological literature. By avoiding any references to mind or intelligence, “cognitive style” positions us more squarely in the domain of information processing, which helps to avoid the dangers of Cartesian dualism. Additionally, psychologists like Frith use the term “cognitive style” in their discussions of cognitive processing among autists, which makes it seem even more appropriate.

Now, to the heart of the argument. This dissertation approaches a specific group of texts written by autists and modernists as a new minor literature, a category theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on the basis of the aesthetic and poetic strategies that the texts share. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “minor literature” is a category that is less restricted by the temporal boundaries used to delineate many literary movements and more focused on texts’ aesthetic and poetic properties. The work of Franz Kafka serves as their primary example as they argue that Kafka revitalized the major language in which he wrote (German) by suspending our perception of it as, first and foremost, a medium for communication. The ways in which a minor literature draws readerly attention away from content toward expression differ, depending on the situation; however, the goal is to “make it [language] vibrate with a new intensity” using its material properties (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 19). The result de-stabilizes linguistic hierarchies so that “[t]here is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states” (22). This unconventional distribution rejects two-dimensional scales in favor of a more scattered, multidimensional plot. Overall, these

authors propose a change in the way we think about the spatial relationships between objects, which include both literary texts and the linguistic elements of which they are composed.

Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that these objects should be treated as both “continuous” and “contiguous” (51), two properties that may seem mutually exclusive. The first term implies that the relationship among them is “uninterrupted,” yet the latter indicates that space is preserved between them. This paradoxical relationship positions the texts in a minor literature as similar in their proximity but still different in the fact that though they may touch, they do not overlap. They are “always in contact...but also always repelled,” which is why Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly describe texts in this minor literature as “adjacent” to one another (61). They are separated by “barriers” that are only passable under certain conditions (51). This model introduces more freedom to move, which gives readers access to new relationships besides simple comparison or juxtaposition—a common term in modernist studies. The same spatial approach can be applied to elements within a single text, an objective pursued in the next two chapters.

This theory becomes even more relevant to the texts at hand because Deleuze and Guattari’s proposal overlaps with the way that author Tito Mukhopadhyay characterizes his style of sensory processing: as “tangential” to the cognitive style common among neuro-normates (*How* 203). In fact, Mukhopadhyay’s word choice is a synonym for “contiguous,” and reading his interpretation with Deleuze and Guattari’s theory yields a more productive way to think about the relation between neuro-normative and autistic cognitive styles (see Figure 1 for a spatial illustration). Though they foreground different

information, these styles do make contact, albeit in a restricted way. Therefore, the environments perceived by neuro-normates and autists, while different, are not wholly dissimilar. With this perceptive word choice, Mukhopadhyay demonstrates both self- and interpersonal awareness. It also acknowledges the negative connotation that neuro-normates, who constitute the social majority, ascribe to autists' cognitive style. The latter are often seen as digressing from the subject at hand, deviating from the appropriate path or going off on a tangent. To a neuro-normate, those on this tangent may look like they are engaging in "an active turning-away from the external world," with "the world" here constituted by neuro-normative perceptions (Bleuler, "Autistic" 399). As chapter two demonstrates, autists are invested in their environments, though their interests may diverge from neuro-normates'.

Different authors and texts use different methods, but the goal of a minor literature is to yield "a new expressivity, a new flexibility, a new intensity" in language. By drawing the reader's attention to the language itself—as opposed to the story that it is used to tell—this approach disrupts the hierarchy of senses that has developed in the word "sense" itself (meaning over sensation). Based on this re-distribution, a minor literature fosters an appreciation for marginalized senses both in terms of meanings considered secondary and sensations ignored as unimportant. This redistribution of significance also makes it so that "there is no longer any difference between being outside and inside" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 8). Such a post-Cartesian approach proves fruitful for questioning the introversion traditionally attributed to both modernism and autism. Deleuze and Guattari take this argument further, aligning outside/inside with form/content as they propose that "pure content that can no longer be separated from its

expression” (Bensmaïa xvii). This approach is similar to the Caledonian anti-syzygy embraced by Hugh MacDiarmid; however, it removes all distinctions between binaries, while MacDiarmid still appears committed to maintaining some.

One consequence of this approach is that it strains the habits that readers have developed for processing information—particularly, the written word. Some readers may perceive this result as negative because it derails the speed with which neuro-normates process information and thereby requires them to expend more conscious effort. For, these readers process information so quickly that they do not even realize they have done it.⁵ The goal is to disrupt their processing habits so that they cannot privilege content as they normally would. As Réda Bensmaïa acknowledges in her foreword, in some cases readers may “slow down to a crawl,” while others may “send [them] into a panic, unfolding at a vertiginous pace” (xvi). The feeling of vertigo figures importantly in this minor literature, though it is most obviously an issue in MacDiarmid’s “Café Scene” (see chapter three). While vertigo refers generally to “a disordered state of mind,” it can more specifically capture a sensation of “whirling” connected to the vibrations with which a minor literature imbues language (*OED*). Either the person herself may feel as if she is spinning or as if the environment itself is. As a result, these texts can leave their readers dizzy and disoriented, not sure which way is up or down. This effect has the potential to shock readers out of their established processing habits, eliminating the boundaries between such spatial categories as outside and inside. In the process, they may also recognize that “unity” is a “nebulous” pursuit (8) as one cannot be sure how far the burrow extends or in which directions.

Deleuze and Guattari's approach has distinct similarities to Viktor Shklovsky's theory of enstrangement from *Theory of Prose* (1917). He proposes that art impels its audience to *see* rather than merely *recognize* an object. Like perception, reading can become a habitual practice according to which "objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged" (5). Here Shklovsky locates a problem with the way many people treat literary texts and their environments, more generally. Specifically, he emphasizes how disrupting automatic processing can enable readers to distribute their attention differently, to consciously develop new habits. Authors can use specific literary techniques to "make perception long and 'laborious'" so that the reader "dwells on the text" (6, 12)—an effect that sounds like the "crawl" described by Bensmaïa. Such texts have the potential to "return sensation to our limbs" (6), to awaken us from numbness and make us aware of properties that had formerly seemed unimportant; yet, to reach this state, we must leave behind accepted ways of reading and encounter the texts as Best and Marcus suggest.

As an aesthetic philosophy, the desire to shock has been denigrated within the context of modernist studies as *épatism*, particularly when directed toward the bourgeoisie.⁶ Though it can "disfigure" a text, according to some critics (Freeman 612), *épatism* can also startle a person out of complacency, which explains why it is often directed at a particular kind of person, one likely to adopt this attitude. By enstranging her from the familiar, a text may cause this reader reject her old beliefs and behave differently. From this perspective, texts in this minor literature take up the tradition of

Decadence by producing literature whose language and linguistic combinations may shock their readers.

In the case of the texts discussed in this dissertation, literary critics and scientists alike have become *too familiar* with established language and particular theoretical frames. These two genres—literature by autists and modernists—may seem very different, but both have been interpreted based on a model that values coherence and unity without recognizing the variables that contribute to such judgments. For modernism, such criticism has embraced the description of texts like *The Waste Land* as collections of juxtaposed fragments. Similarly, autism research and popular culture continue to embrace Frith's theory of weak central coherence, which positions autists as only interested in particular parts or details of an environment, not the wholes that interest neuro-normates. Both treats the individuals they study as isolated from the people around them, struggling to unify their experiences, which are subordinated to neuro-normative ones.

One factor that contributes to their ability to shock is that all of these texts were written by authors who can be characterized as “stranger[s] within [their] own language” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 26). This position reflects their distance from the conventions that typically restrict people's language usage; yet they are not true strangers, or aliens, because the authors still assign them ownership of this language. Writers may consciously choose to occupy this position, as H.D. and T.S. Eliot did when they left the U.S. to live and work in Britain. Others may be thrust into it by an accident of birth. For instance, Hugh MacDiarmid (Scottish) no doubt had a different relation to the English language and British literature than Edward Marsh (English). Similarly,

autists are often treated as and feel like strangers because their brains develop at a different rate and according to a different neural pattern than neuro-normates'. Based on this development, their exposure to and engagements with language and the environments in which they live differ from those available to others.

Such distance from linguistic convention can be detrimental, in that these authors never quite fit in, but they also gain access to many aspects of their environment (which includes their language) that natives do not see. Deleuze and Guattari value similar de-valued social positions, such as the "nomad," "immigrant," and "gypsy" (19), because of the possibilities accessible from such positions based on their freedom to travel. One such benefit is the ability to foster new communities. As Deleuze and Guattari note, "if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (17). Based on their word choice here, participating in such communities would allow an individual to alter her own cognitive style and the aesthetic sense to which it contributes. It also creates the potential for other people to follow her lead, to develop a community that appreciates different ways of processing and interpreting familiar information. This dissertation sees the authors whose work is analyzed here as occupying just such a position.

Critical analyses that participate in the body of scholarship that Levinson has called New Formalism often ignore the biography of the authors whose work they study because such an approach is better aligned with historicism. Yet, Bensmaïa recognizes that Deleuze and Guattari embrace Montaigne's phrase "*Mon livre et moi ne faisons qu'un*" (trans. My book and I, we are one). She writes further:

It is impossible to separate the tool from the artisan...they are together as machine and rhizome, a network, an entangled knot of movements and stops, of impulsions and immobilizations to experience interminably. They constitute what Deleuze and Guattari call a body without organs, to experience and deploy, according to the procedures, methods that are always new. (xii)

While such information is not necessary for appreciating the texts analyzed in this dissertation, it provides another layer that ultimately contributes to a more fruitful and far-reaching analysis.

One reason why the modernists profiled in this chapter may have been so receptive to ideas and techniques that others affiliate with cognitive disorder is that all received psychological treatment or experienced “breakdowns.” Eliot spent time working with Dr. Roger Vittoz in Switzerland; H.D. lived in Vienna while meeting with Sigmund Freud and later in life with Erich Heydt; though Hugh MacDiarmid did not seek treatment, he was known to have experienced a breakdown while living on the island of Whalsay in 1935. These experiences distance them from neuro-normates, providing one explanation why all represent characters that have extreme difficulty making sense of the objects and events that they confront. Despite these experiences, the authors were able to pass as neuro-normates for most of their lives. None carried an open diagnosis, as the autists whose work is analyzed in the first chapter do, which means that they wrote from biological positions privileged by their societies. This explains at least in part why their experimental activities were not written off as mad or as evidence of cognitive disorder. Though they had to justify the importance of their work, many had champions (i.e., Ezra

Pound), and their mental competence would only have been questioned by the most extreme reviewers.

This background may also explain why these authors take more risks pushing their texts toward incoherence than writers like Tito Mukhopadhyay and Craig Romkema. Like most other autists, both are constantly having to justify their experiences and ability to craft literature. For instance, Mukhopadhyay began writing through facilitated communication, a controversial practice where a caregiver mediates an individual's use of language. He had to prove that his mother was not simply manipulating him and his linguistic output, which is one reason he began writing on his own. It seems to be up to autists to prove the authenticity of the literature they have written, that it has not been manipulated by editors or other intermediaries in an attempt to make it more accessible. Additionally, these texts have been treated until recently only as phenomenological reports. As Francesca Happé has reported, “so little has style—the way these accounts are written—been considered of importance that most researchers have simply paraphrased their subject's reminiscences” (222). Paraphrased expressions lose the texture of the original language, an argument furthered by Cleanth Brooks, and drawing attention to the aesthetic and poetic experiments that these authors conduct can unsettle this practice.

Though such historical connections prove important for understanding authors' commitments to particular approaches, they can also limit readers' appreciation of the textual aesthetics. As chapter three discusses, the supposedly fragmented form of modernist texts has often been assessed as a reflection of the chaos of modern environments. Though this reading is logical, it operates on the logic of a major literature,

which “goes from content to expression” such that “one must find, discover, or see the form of expression that goes with it” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 28). On the contrary, “a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward” (28). Treating the aesthetic of modernist texts only as a reflection of modern environments positions it as a major literature. This approach suggests that writers begin with such a goal in mind and thus limits the texts’ potential to incite change and foster new communities. Though Deleuze and Guattari recognize that “[e]xpression must break forms, encourage ruptures,” they link such ruptures with “new sproutings” in a classic deconstructive move: “When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things” (28). The language that literary critics have used to characterize modernist aesthetics does not recognize the “sproutings” that exist in these texts.

The resistance that this dissertation displays to interpreting these texts in terms of their failure or lack comes not just from disability studies but also from Deleuze and Guattari. In their theory of a minor literature, Bensmaïa recognizes that these authors read Kafka differently than Benjamin in that they “refrain[n] from...referring to any idea of failure, of shortcoming, or of ‘immemorial’ guilt” (xiii). Though they see him “constantly running the risk of annihilation, destruction, or regression...Kafka’s work is characterized by the total absence of negation” (xiii). Despite the risk he runs, there is always a “sprouting,” a new structure that appears. Deleuze and Guattari purposefully take this approach because otherwise they would be allowing the return of “a logical, even ontological, priority of content over form” (xvii). In this way, Bensmaïa sees their

reading as a turning point in interpretations of Kafka's work, and it can provide another such turning point in the analysis of literature by autists and other modernists.

Deleuze and Guattari's theory aligns with disability studies in another way as it promotes an ethics that would be similarly embraced by those in this field. In approaching a minor literature—which they, not surprisingly, classify as a rhizome—they argue that “no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse” (3). An “impasse” is typically ignored or discounted because it appears to lead nowhere; it represents a place of resistance that does not allow the actor to reach his goal easily. The texts studied here—particularly, in chapter three—represent many such impasses. In giving space to these places that seem to thwart progress, they do not seek to privilege them but to upset the preference that has developed for representing places that promote easy neuro-normative passage. This approach places the cognitive styles common among autists and neuro-normates on more equal footing, ignoring the socially assigned hierarchy that has been used to devalue autistic experiences. Readers are left to experiment for themselves, try new cognitive styles and find their own paths through this “burrow” (3).

Though a minor literature focuses more on aesthetics than the conditions of a text's production, it may still seem ahistorical to read autists writing in the last 20 years in conjunction with canonical modernist writers publishing 100 years ago. Yet, the histories of these two literary genres are intertwined. To start, the initial development of autism as a diagnosis—from 1908 through 1943⁷—overlaps significantly with the period most associated with modernism in Great Britain and Ireland, and the next two chapters open with summaries of this history, as mentioned earlier. This temporal convergence raises questions regarding how much modernist authors knew about autism and autistic

ways of thinking. As a diagnosis, autism began as a symptom of schizophrenia, which was well known to canonical authors like Eliot and James Joyce. These authors distinguished modernism as a disruption of social and literary traditions inherited from the Victorian and Edwardian periods; texts written by such autists as Temple Grandin also unsettle such practices developed by and for the benefit of neurotypicals, who constitute the dominant social group at this time. While medical professionals like Bleuler and Leo Kanner were pathologizing the cognitive style associated with autism, experimental artists like Joyce, MacDiarmid, and Virginia Woolf were featuring similar ways of processing information in literary form.⁸ Through their common attention to cognition and form of literary organization, texts in this new minor literature embody a cognitive style that today's medical and scientific community associates with autism and, thus, regards as abnormal. Though autists exhibit a bias toward this cognitive style, which results from their non-normative and shared forms of neural organization, all of these authors deliberately choose to make this way of processing information visible in their texts.

Consequently, not all texts written by autists are part of this minor literature, and the same applies to texts labeled "modernist." Though Daniel Tammet is on the spectrum, his *Embracing the Wide Sky: A Tour Across the Horizons of the Mind* (2009) treats language more as a communicative rather than an experimental tool, as do D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924-28), among many others. In these texts, language functions more as a vehicle by which a story is conveyed than as a tool to disturb conventional ways of thinking and consuming literary texts. They represent a major literature, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms.

Additionally, not all of the texts included in this category fulfill the characteristics of a minor literature—and this minor literature, in particular—in the same way. Texts written by autists maintain more of a balance between language’s function as a medium for communication and as an artistic tool. A variety of explanations for this difference exist, some already mentioned, though others include the influence of editors and the contemporary publishing market.⁹ As a result, texts written by autists in this minor literature exhibit more concern about using the written form to connect with their readers than texts written by individuals off the spectrum; they strain literary conventions while still striving to remain comprehensible. In contrast, texts written by authors like MacDiarmid and Eliot more openly disregard the literary conventions assumed to facilitate communication and comprehension by taking this literary style to a more radical aesthetic and poetic place.

The two chapters that follow apply these methodological approaches to first, literature by autists, and second, literature by modernists. Autist Donna Williams extols art’s power to “take[s] you inside the experience rather than speaking to you from outside it” (10). Too often, scientific research and literary criticism speak from outside, imposing interpretations whose power persists long after they have been factually left behind. As art, the literary texts analyzed in this project unsettle what Williams refers to as “the learned system of interpretations” upon which most people depend in their everyday life (11). This system has become insufficient to meet the needs expressed in these texts; thus, it must be shifted, altered, and a revised system developed. This dissertation aim to further such a goal by pushing open a door that is already ajar to accommodate less normative ways of experiencing life and language.

¹ This chapter includes material that was previous published in Barber-Stetson, “Slow Processing.”

² In fact, more recent studies have found that among autists this overconnectivity remains consistent in distinct areas—particularly in what is called the “salience network,” which includes the anterior insular cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex. For more information, see Uddin et al.

³ For more information about cognitive styles, see Zhang, Sternberg, and Rayner.

⁴ In the context of modernist studies, David Herman briefly uses the term “mind-style” in his chapter from *The Emergence of Mind*, and he relies on a definition for this term that is similar to the way in which I use “cognitive style.”

⁵ I treat this issue more directly in the article “Slow Processing: A New Minor Literature by Autists and Modernists.”

⁶ In D.H. Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), the narrator describes artists “whose very pigments seemed to exist only to *épater le bourgeois*” (52).

⁷ These dates mark the publication of Eugen Bleuler’s “Die prognose der dementia praecox–schizophreniegruppe” and Leo Kanner’s “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact.”

⁸ Some literary scholars have already proposed connections between autism and modernism, and I build on their research when making this argument. See Quayson; McDonagh; Glastonbury; and Valente.

⁹ For example, Temple Grandin had a co-writer for *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1986). Conversely, in *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism* (2002), Dawn Prince-Hughes expressly clarifies that she has “chosen not to edit the

essays” (xii), and when writing her own essay, she “let [her]self just write as [she] thought” (xiii). For more background about this conflict, see Happé.

Chapter 2

The Flat Theory of Weak Central Coherence¹

As a discipline, disability studies questions the hegemony of dominant structures and ideologies, a methodology it shares with queer theory and Marxism. It also draws attention to the kinds of literal and figurative movement afforded by the social and political conditions of a specific context. These conditions undergird our classification of particular bodies and movements as disabled or normal, and disability studies promotes rigorous analysis of them.

This chapter focuses on the forms of cognitive movement exhibited by autists like Tito Mukhopadhyay, Wendy Lawson, Temple Grandin, and Craig Romkema engage. Two major forces influence the directions in which their cognitive energies flow: their embodied situations—specifically, the way in which the neurons in their brains are organized—and interactions with neuro-normates and the environments in which they live. Particular kinds of cognitive and linguistic movement are visible in the literary texts that these authors have written, specifically, *How Can I Talk if My Lips Don't Move?: Inside My Autistic Mind* (2008), *Life Behind Glass: A Personal Account of Autism Spectrum Disorder* (1998), *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (2006), and *Embracing the Sky: Poems Beyond Disability* (2002). Cognition shapes these texts, and it appears most prominently in the content of passages where the authors describe the ways that they process information and also the literary techniques that they use in so doing.

Though this spectrum of disorders contains extreme diversity, psychologists and neuroscientists have repeatedly drawn a connection among autists based on the proposal

that they share a common way of processing information: a “cognitive style.” As mentioned in the introduction, this term denotes “a recurring pattern of perceptual and intellectual activity” (Schultz and Lavenda 121). Though human brains are largely similar, even small structural differences can significantly affect the style toward which a person tends and her engagement with an environment. As this chapter notes, cognitive neuroscientists like Eric Courchesne have recognized that many neurons in autists’ brains are organized according to a different logic than they are in neurotypicals’ brains. Based on these structures, all humans—not just autists—are unconsciously predisposed to apply some patterns instead of others. Neurotypicals also have a processing bias toward a particular cognitive style, one that scientific research has established as “normal”—hence, my use of “neuro-normate” throughout this chapter.

Despite this difference, both autists and neuro-normates can employ different cognitive styles if they have sufficient time and motivation. In fact, we commonly alter our cognitive style based on both the task and its context. As research in neuroplasticity has demonstrated, our brains change over time in response to our behavior and environment. Consequently, cognition should not be treated as an immutable object or property; it is a flexible behavior affected by but not wholly dependent on the structure of an individual’s brain.

Developmental psychologist Uta Frith’s theory of “weak central coherence” has dominated cultural and scientific discussions about how individuals with ASDs process information for almost thirty years. The current *DSM* does not refer to Frith or her theory, though the previous version (*DSM-IV-TR*) did include “persistent preoccupation with parts of objects” as a descriptor for “restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of

behavior” (“299.0 Autistic Disorder”).² Despite its recent fall from grace, parents like Matei Calinescu and Michael Blastland continue to fall back on this theory in their memoirs to understand the way their children experience their shared environments. However, recent research has turned toward discussions of the interaction between global and local processing, which differs from Frith’s approach. This development is positive because it openly rejects a deficit-based assessment of this cognitive style and allows for more depth. It reveals the flatness of Frith’s theory but leaves unquestioned the hierarchy according to which a so-called “top-down” style of processing is privileged as normal.

As a critical term, “flat” has generated attention through its recent use to describe a style of web design. In his short article “Flat Theory,” David M. Berry cites several companies that take this approach, presenting information without the stylistic features that make it appear three-dimensional, such as “bevels, reflections, drop shadows, and gradients” (Amber Turner qtd. in Berry). With this design, companies like Apple also implement what Berry calls “a laminate structure” of interfaces, thus taking a different stylistic approach to introduce depth. This arrangement “enables meaning to be conveyed through the organization of the Z-axis” as users navigate the different “layers,” according to Berry. Such multidimensional language differs from that which Frith uses, but it will be familiar to many readers of contemporary materialist theories.

Berry’s analysis is closely related to such philosophical approaches as Manuel De Landa’s flat ontology and the broader but closely related object-oriented ontology—both of which have their foundation in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. All of these theories grapple with questions of scale while advocating that we revise the ways that we understand relationships between objects and people. Timothy Morton provides one such

example in his discussion of what he calls hyperobjects: “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,” such as global warming (*Hyperobjects* 1). Because of the scope of their distribution, “one only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment” (4). Despite their seeming absence, hyperobjects are “viscous,” to use Morton’s term. Though we may not sense their presence, “there is no outside” (5); these objects are always sticking to us, going inside of us, floating in the air around us. When locating hyperobjects, Morton suggests we look for their effects on other objects and/or beings through attention to “a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects” (*Hyperobjects* 1). Literature presents just such a space.

Thinking about such figures may require a different cognitive style, for “Hyperobjects don’t just burn a hole in the world; they burn a hole in your mind” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 130). Considering perception from the ecological perspective presented by Morton draws attention to the dynamic relationships inherent in the development of what autistic Mukhopadhyay calls a “mental map” (*How Can I Talk* 191). Neuro-normates and autists both unconsciously develop such images to make their experiences within particular environments more predictable. These maps come to constitute their realities; however, many people do not recognize that these maps, like others, are representations. They believe that mental maps passively embody a stable set of characteristics that are accessible to and recognized by all people. They do not realize that these maps can be composed differently as a result of the cognitive style(s) used at a given time and the stimuli on which these styles motivate us to focus. As it exposes the assumptions that obscure such conditions, this analysis aims to incite “a being-quake” similar to that which Morton proposes (19).

In light of such theoretical approaches, I suggest that Frith's theory is *flat*. Like a flat table, its uniform appearance allows it to function well. Her concept of "weak central coherence" is easily accessible to people from diverse educational backgrounds and applicable to a wide variety of situations. It reduces a complex situation to a single plane of perception, and over the years, Frith has remained largely consistent in applying this interpretive frame to research data. Yet, like a flat color, it lacks the luster—or, depth—that would give it life. Frith has based her theory on the one-dimensional concept of field dependence developed by psychologist Herman A. Witkin, and the language she uses reflects the spatial limits of this approach. She restricts her theorization of autists' cognitive style to a single plane, thus reducing the complexity of real-time cognition. Based on such limitations, this analysis looks to add depth to Frith's theory of weak central coherence in both a literal and figurative sense.

Frith's theory falls particularly flat when read with literature written by individuals with ASDs. These artists whose work is analyzed here come from different cultural, educational, and national backgrounds—Mukhopadhyay grew up in India but now lives in the United States; Lawson grew up in the UK but has also lived in Australia; and both Grandin and Romkema were born and raised in the United States. Their texts reveal the flatness of Frith's theory in their organization, the descriptions of cognitive processing they provide, and the language that they use to structure these descriptions.

In his attempt to "radically displac[e] the human" (17), Morton shares a similar motivation with the authors whose work is examined here. These texts displace the neuro-normate from the center of scientific analyses and cultural knowledge about autism spectrum disorders. They loose his hold on concepts like coherence by exposing the false

distance that exists between this individual and his environment. As Morton recognizes, “‘distance’ is only a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect me from the nearness of things” (27). Whether executed actively or unconsciously, distance functions as “a defense mechanism” (27). Frith’s theory reflects a normative desire achieve a feeling of security and certainty by believing both one’s environment *and* one’s body to be a coherent entities. What Morton describes is a fundamental *méconnaissance* in the tradition of Jacques Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” one that allows our bodies and environments to appear singular and coherent when they are, in fact, multiple, full of potential conflict.

Before turning to Frith’s theory, it is important to chart the development of autism as a diagnostic category to understand how her theory came to be and to what dominant ideas autistic authors are responding.

The History of Autism

Any attempt to describe autism as a single coherent category will fail. As the first chapter tried to show, it is a slippery term that Donna Williams describes as “less substantial, less dependable, than a piece of lint” (9). It escapes attempts to define it first because as it is a pervasive developmental disorder that manifests itself differently from individual to individual. Additionally, the diagnosis itself has changed significantly, as this section will chart, from its inception in 1911 until the present day.

Eugen Bleuler

Though Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler first used the term “autism” in a 1908 article, he provided the first significant description of it in *Dementia Praecox or the*

Group of Schizophrenias (1911). For Bleuler, autism named a symptom of schizophrenia that described an abnormal way of thinking: “the inclination to divorce oneself from reality” (Bleuler, *Dementia* 14, 63). Individuals who display autistic thinking turn inward, hence the term’s etymological origination in the Greek *autos*, or “self.” In this sense, autism has much in common with psychoanalytic discussions of egotism and Carl Jung’s concept of introversion, which David Rapaport points out in his translation of Bleuler’s “Autistic Thinking” (399n2).³ To create their personal realities, individuals demonstrate what might be called selective perception. They ignore those aspects of reality that contradict their fantasy, seeking only pleasurable sensations and avoiding external stimuli that cause pain. By “withdraw[ing] actively from the reality which angers and irritates” (419), they create a reality that functions for them alone. Because he sees these individuals as allow their emotions to dominate rationality, Bleuler reads autism as an affective disorder, a disorder of motivation. This pathologization of the decision to turn away from collective reality and specific(ly negative) manifestations of affect persist as tropes in later research.

Bleuler’s autism relies on the questionable belief that there is one true reality, which grounds the neuro-normate’s existence. According to this model, any individual who does not conform to this reality must receive some punishment for making a deviant choice. Such an individual has rejected the social world in which he has a moral obligation to participate. Bleuler is certainly correct when he argues that those exhibiting autism will have “conflicts with the environment” (423), but he makes a distinction between autism and autistic ways of thinking that distinguishes who should be punished or pathologized. Individuals who display autism both think autistically *and* withdraw

from reality. Bleuler argues that it is possible to display autistic thinking but not withdraw from reality. Individuals displaying what he calls “normal autism” retain the ability to distinguish their fantasy from the common reality. Because they accede to this reality while still participating in an inner world, their fantasies are comprehensible to others. Even though he sees autistic thinking as a symptom of schizophrenia, neuro-normates can also use it. This perspective is similar to today’s assignation of a particular cognitive style to autists, with the recognition that neuro-normates can also use it; they are just biased toward a different style.

Though Bleuler claims autistic thinking is illogical, it may simply operate according to a logic that is unfamiliar and at times inaccessible to neuro-normates. Rapaport describes Bleuler’s autism “fundamentally as a certain form of *organization* of percepts, ideas, drives, and behaviors in general” (“Autistic” 411), and it is this organizational structure that interests me. Autistic thinking disturbs and “loosen[s]” associations (421), which Bleuler sees as having “endless possibilities” (432). Unlike latent content, autistic thinking can be either unconscious or conscious, and it can be employed to greater or lesser degrees. Bleuler even recognizes that “[a] small degree of autism carried into life may be of some use” because “[a] degree of one-sidedness is indispensable in pursuing certain goals” (435). He cites poets as individuals who display autistic thinking as they relive experiences and release the attendant emotions while writing (417).

Despite its early publication Bleuler’s 1911 text was not translated into English until 1950, so it remained largely unknown to the U.S. populace.⁴ Many people remark on the coincidence that Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, a psychiatrist in Baltimore and a

pediatrician in Vienna, would both write significant studies of autism in the 1940s.⁵

Looking back to Bleuler's work, however, shows that autism, as a term, had already been circulating for thirty years.

Leo Kanner

The translation of Bleuler's 1911 text was preceded by Leo Kanner's influential 1943 article "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact." Kanner published this article while he was the Director of Child Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and is credited with naming this disorder "early infantile autism" (Frith, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome* 5). In it, Kanner uses case studies of eleven children to propose a general profile of autism, which he claims to be the first researcher to describe (242). In fact, Kanner's descriptions of autistic behavior are strikingly similar to contemporary diagnostic criteria, indicating that despite its publication nearly seventy years ago, this article still has critical purchase in autism studies generally and psychology more specifically. Kanner's work differs from Bleuler's in his attempt to separate autism nosologically from schizophrenia rather than to subsume it as a schizophrenic symptom. For him, autism differs from schizophrenia in two ways. First, autistic children manifest symptoms from birth, whereas schizophrenic children display a period of typical development followed by a change in behavior (248).⁶ These symptoms include the social deficits on which Kanner focuses. According to Kanner, we should not talk about autists withdrawing from social life because they never participated in it to begin with (242). Second, schizophrenics gradually move away from the world as their symptoms appear, while autists move towards it by participating in neuro-normative society more

over time (249). Thus, Kanner describes autists according to a model of progression and schizophrenics according to a model of regression.

Kanner locates lack of social interest as the most important characteristics of this disorder. Autistic children are born “with [an] innate inability to form the usual, biologically provided affective contact with people, just as other children come into the world with innate physical or intellectual hand[i]caps” (250). They do not desire social contact; instead, they exhibit “extreme autistic aloneness” by ignoring people in favor of objects (242). Objects are always the same, which is why autistic children prefer them; they make no demands, social or otherwise, on the children. This “anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness” is Kanner’s second-most important characteristic of autism (245). People disturb the autistic child by introducing disorder into what is repeatedly figured as a peaceful, almost Zen-like, state (244). Thus, Kanner figures autistic children as wanting to be alone to avoid change and uncertainty. As we saw in Bleuler’s work, Kanner positions the children as choosing to engage with objects over people in what appears to be an act of selfishness. Largely because of this article, autism becomes a social disorder through which children demonstrate an “inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life” (242). However, Kanner neglects to describe what the conditions of “the ordinary way” of relating to people and situations *are*, a common oversight that allows them to morph over time.

Kanner’s third major concern is that autistic children do not seem to use language for communicative purposes, though the actual motivation for their language use remains unclear. They demonstrate an “excellent rote memory,” but their language use devolves

into what Kanner perceives to be meaningless repetition, or echolalia (243). Spoken language becomes “a self-sufficient, semantically and conversationally valueless or grossly distorted memory exercise” (243). Kanner is most concerned by their lack of spontaneity, which carries over to autistic behavior in general. One example of this lack of spontaneity is autistic children’s inability to appropriately use shifters like pronouns: “Personal pronouns are repeated just as heard, with no change to suit the altered situation....Not only the words, but even the intonation is retained” (244).⁷ Their speech, along with all of their behaviors, is “monotonously repetitious,” a neuro-normative description if ever there was one (245). As monotonous, these behaviors lack variety; they are only one tone and display the autist’s desire to maintain order through routine. As such, these behaviors do not maintain neuro-normates’ interest, although they do pique it with their abnormality. His assessment is not all negative, though Kanner remains suspicious of “[t]he astounding vocabulary of the speaking child, the excellent memory for events of several years before, the phenomenal rote memory for poems and names, and the precise recollection of complex patterns and sequences” (247-8).

In his second article, “Irrelevant and Metaphorical Language in Early Infantile Autism,” Kanner provides an account of autistic language that differs slightly from his earlier views. This article uses some of the same examples, but it explores autistic language in a less negatively charged way and provides examples of the innovative ways in which autists use metaphor. Unlike neuro-normative metaphors, autistic metaphors rely on a “private, original frame of reference” of which only the autists and those close to her will be aware (244). For example, Kanner describes one child who would say “Peter eater” every time he saw a saucepan. Only someone close to him would know that

his mother was once reciting “Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater” when she dropped a saucepan. He explicitly treats such language as “metaphorical expressions which, instead of relying on accepted or acceptable substitutions as encountered in poetry and conversational phraseology, are rooted in concrete, specific, personal experiences of the child who uses them. So long as the listener has no access to the original source, the meaning of the metaphor must remain obscure to him, and the child’s remark is not ‘relevant’ to any sort of verbal or other situational interchange” (243). Kanner recognizes that the origin of this name, while unusual, is perfectly clear with sufficient background.

Neuro-normative metaphors rely on common usage to be recognized as metaphors, but unlike neuro-normates, “[t]he autistic child does not depend on such prearranged semantic transfers. He makes up his own as he goes along” (244), argues Kanner. In this article, he positions autists as linguistic innovators. For example, synecdoche—calling a car a set of wheels—requires the recognition that wheels are an integral part of a car. Though it might be difficult for another person to grasp at first, an autist who called a car “wipers” would be using synecdoche appropriately, despite the atypicality of this association. Kanner again legitimates these expressions by arguing that the metaphors created by autistic children “do not differ essentially from poetical and ordinary phraseological metaphors,” except that “the creation is in the main self-sufficient and self-contained” (244). In this case, his primary issue with autistic language is that these children make little effort to clarify the referent of their language for an audience. Unfortunately, linguistic constructions such as these are used by Kanner and still today by others as evidence of autists’ lack of interest in social interaction.

Hans Asperger

Discussion continues today about the relation between autism and Asperger's syndrome, which is particularly evident in the elimination of Asperger's syndrome from the *DSM-5*. As of January 2011, the American Psychiatric Association reclassified Asperger's as an autism spectrum disorder, a controversial move. A Viennese pediatrician, Asperger published part of his doctoral thesis, "Die 'Autistischen Psychopathen' im Kindesalter" ("Autistic Psychopathy" in Childhood), in 1944, the year after Kanner's article was published. Like Kanner, Asperger believed that he was the first to locate autism as a disorder separate from schizophrenia (Frith, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome* 6). Unlike Kanner, Asperger recognizes the contributions of Eugen Bleuler and locates his concept of autism as descended from Bleuler's theories (Asperger 38). The goal of Asperger's paper was to describe the characteristics of this disorder by performing a detailed analysis of four case studies. To do so, he also relies on general experience with more than 200 autistic children over ten years. Frith translated the article in 1991, making it available to an English-speaking audience for the first time. In her introduction to *Autism and Asperger's Syndrome* and translation notes, she emphasizes the similarities between the patient profiles used by Kanner and Asperger and the findings of both papers.

For example, Kanner and Asperger both consider autism to be a "disorder of the will" (48), like schizophrenia, in which individuals choose not to participate in the social world that confronts them. They see this lack of social reciprocity as the primary deficit of autism. Bleuler reads this deficit as a result of autistic preference for an inner dream world, but Asperger focuses on the autistic individual's attention to other parts of the

external environment. Rather than a contrast between inner and outer worlds, Asperger describes autism as “a disturbance of the lively relationship with the whole environment” (74). Asperger’s word choice here suggests that autists’ relationship with their environments is lifeless or static. Because they have this kind of relationship with their environments, many autists to develop “a special interest which enables them to achieve quite extraordinary levels of performance in a certain area” (45). For example, Fritz’s interest is mathematics, and as Frith’s notes tell the reader, he became an astronomy professor, quite a success for someone that teachers labeled “uneducable” (39). As always, much of an autist’s success seems to depend on how close his interest is to neuro-normative interests. As Asperger harshly points out, “it is possible to consider such individuals both as child prodigies and as imbeciles with ample justification” (46).

Despite the limitations of autistic interests, Asperger praises these individuals for their “independence in thought, experience, and speech” (50). This aspect of Asperger’s essay has become well known, mostly because he sees social value in autists at a time when very few do. But, Asperger also pathologizes their hyper-individuality based on the distance that autists maintain between themselves and other people. They supposedly “make life difficult for themselves” through their determination to ignore education provided by teachers and parents and pursue their own methods for achieving goals (75). For example, Asperger finds Harro’s mathematic methods “fascinating” in their originality, but “[t]hey were often so complicated—however ingenious—that they resulted in errors” (56). Harro’s case supports Asperger’s claim that autists present “an inability to learn from adults in conventional ways. Instead the autistic individual needs to create everything out of his own thought and experience” (56). And so, Asperger

places responsibility for social difficulties on the autistic's shoulders even while recognizing autists for their creativity.

Children with autism manifest a more general "disturbance of active attention," which Asperger sees in the unusual interests discussed above and also the particular gaze that they have in common (76). For example, here is Asperger's description of Fritz's way of looking:

His eye gaze was strikingly odd. It was generally directed into the void, but was occasionally interrupted by a momentary malignant glimmer. When somebody was talking to him he did not enter into the sort of eye contact which would normally be fundamental to conversation. He darted short "peripheral" looks and glanced at both people and objects only fleetingly. It was "as if he wasn't there".

(42)

In this passage, Asperger recognizes eye contact as an important marker of social attention. For him and other neuro-normates, Fritz's intermittent gaze suggests a lack of interest. Despite this apparent disinterest, Fritz surprises Asperger with his level of attention to his environment. During testing, Fritz "betrayed an excellent apprehension of a situation and an accurate judgement of people" (45).⁸ This awareness is surprising because neuro-normates assume that a person who is not looking is not paying attention to and thus is not interested in them. This oblique gaze is not unique to Fritz: "It was typical of Fritz, as of all similar children, that he seemed to see a lot using only 'peripheral vision', or to take in things 'from the edge of attention'. Yet these children are able to analyse and retain what they catch in such glimpses" (49). As Frith points out,

Kanner's profile of Virginia who "stood listlessly, looking into space" would fit also fit this description, even though Kanner does not attend to autistic gazes (Asperger 42n1).

As this example shows, Asperger remains perplexed by many autistic behaviors, unable to understand the cause or reason behind them. Asperger does not know why "[l]ittle things drove [Harro L.] to senseless fury" or "what had struck him as funny" (51, 52). He focuses particular attention on what he perceives to be aggressive and malicious behaviors and the lack of respect for authority displayed by his patients. Some of these children fight often, and in particular, Fritz "lacked distance and talked without shyness even to strangers. Although he acquired language very early, it was impossible to teach him the polite form of address ('Sie')" (40). The respect that would typically manifest itself through language is absent in Fritz's case, a trend that repeats itself throughout Asperger's article. He extrapolates these findings to suggest that autists "treat everyone as an equal as a matter of course and speak with a natural self-confidence" (81). They act "without any regard for differences in age, social rank or common courtesies," a quality that Asperger does seem to value for its egalitarian nature.

Even though Asperger interprets many autistic behaviors as malicious, he contradicts himself by acknowledging that "[t]hey do not show deliberate acts of cheek, but have a genuine defect in their understanding of the other person" (81). Yet, Asperger's earlier comments suggest that it is not only autists who do not understand neuro-normates; the reverse is true as well. To them, an autist can appear to be an incomprehensible but "intelligent automata" (58), "like an alien, oblivious to the surrounding noise and movement, and inaccessible in his preoccupation" (78). Asperger's valuable scientific work provides a more complete understanding of autism and begins to

suggest “that autistic people have their place in the organism of the social community” (89). He does not indicate exactly what exactly this place *is*, but it seems to be integrated with neuro-normative society, not partitioned off from it.

The Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)

Published by the American Psychiatric Society (APA), the DSM has gone through five editions. The first *DSM* was published in 1952, and it has gone through six versions since then: the *DSM-II* (1968), *DSM-III* (1980), *DSM-III-TR* (1987), *DSM-IV* (1994), *DSM-IV-TR* (2000), and *DSM-5* (2013). Autism first appeared in the *DSM-I* and the *DSM-II* only as a symptom of childhood schizophrenia, which is interesting given that Bleuler discussed it in relation to both adults and children. When the *DSM-III* was published in 1980, autism appeared for the first time as a diagnosis separate from schizophrenia—more than thirty years after both Kanner and Asperger published their first articles.

In the *DSM-III*, what the APA calls “Infantile Autism” is still defined in relation to schizophrenia, in that these children should not display schizophrenic characteristics that include “delusions, hallucinations, loosening of associations, and incoherence.”⁹ It should affect children before age three, unlike schizophrenia, and the remainder of the disorder’s characteristics are heavily influenced by Kanner. For example, autists should demonstrate a “pervasive lack of responsiveness to other people” and delayed language with disordered use, two areas that Kanner’s article emphasized. Finally, they should have “bizarre responses to various aspects of the environment, e.g., resistance to change,

peculiar interest in or attachments to animate or inanimate objects,” all of which were part of Kanner’s profile.

With the *DSM-III-TR*, “Infantile Autism” becomes “Autistic Disorder,” a much more detailed diagnosis that covers an individual’s lifespan. It includes a variety of interesting examples with each criterion that give more detail about how the APA understood each impairment at the time. For example, under “gross impairment in ability to make peer friendships,” the APA includes “demonstrates lack of understanding of conventions of social interaction, for example, reads phone book to uninterested peer.” Examples like this one carry a note of the ridiculous and implausible, which correlates with the presence of language rife with judgments oriented toward neuro-normates. According to the *DSM-III-TR*, autists should display “[m]arkedly *abnormal* nonverbal communication,” “[u]nreasonable insistence on following routines,” and “[m]arked distress over changes in *trivial* aspects of environment.” They would also make “frequent *irrelevant* remarks.” In each of these phrases, I have italicized language marked by such judgments. Despite these problems, the *DSM-III-TR* provides more detailed criteria than the *DSM-III*, finally taking autism seriously as a disorder.

The *DSM-IV* and *DSM-IV-TR* contain no new criteria, only revisions of the criteria from the *DSM-III-TR*. The three major areas of impairment remain the same: social interaction, communicative language, and “restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.” While individuals still need to exhibit half of the listed symptoms, that now only means six of twelve symptoms, whereas with the *DSM-III-TR* they need to demonstrate eight of the sixteen. In an important move, the *DSM-IV* contains fewer absolute judgments or criteria that seem impossible to verify

scientifically, such as the “[a]bsence of imaginative activity” in the *DSM-III-TR*. It also eliminates much of the language that privileges neuro-normative experience, which I detailed above. Interestingly, the APA drops several of Kanner’s central findings in the transition from the *DSM-III-TR* to the *DSM-IV*. No longer does it talk about individuals with autism as displaying “impaired imitation,” except in regards to their propensity to engage in parallel rather than integrated play. Nor does it present them as having trouble with pronoun usage or a “[m]arked lack of awareness of the existence or feelings of others,” both of which were present in the *DSM-III*. However, it does still maintain a connection to Kanner in the “[p]ersistent preoccupation with parts of objects (for example, sniffing or smelling objects, repetitive feeling of texture of materials, spinning wheels of toy cars).” The *DSM-IV* drops any reference to the unusual “volume, pitch, stress, rate, rhythm, and intonation” employed by autists and their “lack of interest in stories about imaginary events.”

The 2013 transition from the *DSM-IV-TR* to the *DSM-5* is important for two reasons. First, the category of Autism Spectrum Disorders now includes Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). This absorption has been controversial, sparking much debate from both the autism and Asperger’s communities. Second, the criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorders now include references to the unusual sensory experiences of these individuals. According to this criterion, individuals with ASDs should display “[h]yper-or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment; (such as apparent indifference to pain/heat/cold, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or

touching of objects, fascination with lights or spinning objects)” (American Psychiatric Association). This criterion takes into account what researchers since Bleuler have noticed, a very belated inclusion.

Uta Frith and Weak Central Coherence

Uta Frith first presented her theory of weak central coherence in a chapter of *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (1989) entitled “A Fragmented World.” This placement draws attention to the prominent role that the fragment plays in Frith’s theory. In Frith’s initial characterization, autists display a deficit in drawing connections among elements within their environments that reveals “the lack of a drive for meaning” (*Autism* 152). She suggests that autists are more interested in attending to a single aspect of an environment or situation, contrary to neuro-normates, who look for the object or force that will turn this information into an organized whole. Autists are missing a motivation that she considers fundamental to human experience and uses here as a cause for pathologizing an autistic cognitive style. Instead, Frith suggests that autists attend to individual elements—“details”—before looking for a connection between them.

The word “details” is frequently used in literature that discusses the ways autists process information. Details are the particulars—the individual elements—that make up more complex wholes, and this subordinate relationship suggests that they are more comprehensible, easier to process than wholes. They are also often thought to mean less as elements than when combined to form gestalts, to be less important than the whole itself. This belief is supported by the common mistranslation of Gestalt psychologist Kurt

Koffka's claim "The whole is *greater than* the sum of its parts."¹⁰ Therefore, it can be either criticism or praise to tell someone that she has written a detailed narrative.

An implicit relationship between a whole and the parts into which it can be broken up goes back to the word's etymological origin in the French *détailler*. In its literal sense, this word describes the action of cutting something into smaller pieces (a side of beef, for instance). Though "detail" as a verb does not have quite the same meaning in English, this origin continues to influence both the importance we commonly assign to details—as subordinate to the whole—and the way we conceptualize cognition as a process in which we begin with a whole which is subsequently broken up into smaller pieces, or "fragments." Thus, there is an intrinsic and important connection between "detail" and "fragment," though the word "detail" does not have the same sense of loss inherent in "fragment."

In later years, Frith softens her language by describing weak central coherence as "a processing *bias* towards features rather than a processing *deficit* for wholes" (Frith and Happé 14; emphasis added).¹¹ Such features are now positioned as "discrete units, distinct from the field as a whole" (16). This language is more spatially precise than Frith's earlier "details," yet it does not introduce depth into her model. The revision does acknowledge that autists have the ability to see gestalts; they do not lack this interest entirely as she suggested earlier. They can overcome a tendency toward weak central coherence using intellect (6), or as Asperger describes, through "an effort of the will" (qtd. in 15). Thus, autists can transition to global processing if they have explicit instruction or sufficient time. Yet, Frith and Happé's revised word choice still stigmatizes autists who are not "strong" or "focused" enough to alter the direction of their attention.

It also continues to use the flat language of part/whole that is intrinsic to weak central coherence.

As evidence to support her theory, Frith cites studies that use the Children's Embedded Figures Test (EFT). Designed by Witkin, this instrument measures a person's level of field dependence by asking them to locate particular shapes within more complex constructions.¹² Figure 2 provides a sample EFT. As Francesca Happé summarizes, "People with ASD are often *extremely good at the EFT*" (1077). More specifically, children with ASDs are "faster and more accurate than normal children of the same mental age" at locating a particular shape embedded within a picture (Frith, *Autism* 153). Despite the positive nature of these findings—autists have a distinct skill on which they can rely—Frith and Happé still choose to locate this skill as one of the reasons for which autism is pathologized.

They treat this skill as a deficit because it does not align with neuro-normative tendencies.¹³ For neuro-normates, according to Frith, "fragments, once assembled into a single picture, lose their meaning as fragments and are only meaningful as part of the greater unit they belong to, the whole picture" (*Autism* 152). The effect of context overpowers the components themselves. From this perspective, neuro-normates could themselves be pathologized for displaying interest only in the overall field and not individual elements, for treating these details as a means to an end. However, Frith takes the opposite approach, describing neuro-normates' drive for meaning as a "natural tendency" (154), thereby pathologizing autists' cognitive style as unnatural.

The puzzle appears in Frith's discussion as a spatial metaphor that she somewhat unexpectedly takes from Georges Perec's *Life, A User's Manual* (1978)—one that reappears frequently in discussions of autism. As Perec writes:

The only thing that counts is the ability to link this piece to other pieces... The pieces are readable, take on a sense, only when assembled; in isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing—just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded... in fitting it into one of its neighbours, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece. (Perec 216)

Perec's narrative provides an explanation of and a justification for Frith's argument about information processing among autists. The goal of solving the puzzle, "trying all the plausible combinations one by one" (218), becomes "the only thing that counts," the only worthwhile goal within this context. Frith does not acknowledge that this is a value judgment, one that depends on the privilege given to a particular outcome—completion—or that this goal may be more difficult for people using different cognitive styles to achieve.

Frith's use of this metaphor introduces a relation between the EFT and a game that many people with ASDs enjoy. In fact, the puzzle has come to symbolize autism through the Autism Awareness Ribbon distributed by the Autism Society of America. Such toys challenge a person's "ingenuity," her creative abilities, but they also challenge a person's ability to process information. Though Tito Mukhopadhyay becomes a celebrity within his village for completing puzzles, he refused to interact with what he calls "the massacred deer" the first time that he saw a puzzle with this picture on it. He writes that "[i]t hurt to see the deer in four pieces" (146). His "discomfort" here is

directly related to the “incomplete picture” as he cannot “tolerate things being out of place” (146, 147). This example and Mukhopadhyay’s drive for order complicates Frith’s suggestion that autists do not have an interest in bringing the pieces of an image together.

The EFT has distinct similarities to another instrument, called the Navon Task, which measures the effects of the so-called “global precedence” effect (see Figure 3).¹⁴ As they perform this pattern-based task, “participants are briefly presented with a large letter shape made up of smaller letters of either the same kind (compatible condition) or a different kind (incompatible condition), and are required to identify the letters at the global level and/or local level” (Plaisted, Swettenham, and Rees 736). When using this tool, Kate Plaisted, John Swettenham, and Liz Rees found that “[t]ypically developing children made most errors when the target appeared at the local level whereas children with autism made more errors when the target appeared at the global level” (733). Therefore, individuals on the autism spectrum are not affected in the same way as neuro-normates by the so-called “global precedence” effect, which suggests that among neuro-normates “global information is processed faster and is therefore available earlier than local information” (734). What could be conversely called the local precedence effect overlaps with strong field independence, the term used by Frith.

This task developed out of research by psychologist David Navon who captures the cognitive style shared by neuro-normates with a common metaphor: these people “perceive the forest before the trees.”¹⁵ Though it is more than thirty years old, this article provides useful information about how top-down processing is assumed to function within a normative population—information on which research about the cognitive styles employed by autists is based. According to Navon, for a neuro-normate

“a scene is decomposed rather than built up. Thus the perceptual system treats *every* scene *as if* it were in a process of being focused or zoomed in on, where at first it is relatively indistinct and then it gets clearer and sharper” (354). Here, the word “decompose” suggests that the perceiver begins with a complete unit and then breaks it down into the elements that constitute it; it provides the conceptual basis for the “top-down” name given to a normative cognitive style. But, as “zoom” suggests, the person using this style will not be able to see all of these elements because the process continues “without losing focus” (*OED*). The distribution of fading within the scene merely changes. As one zooms, some features automatically “dominate” others based on our past experiences, which create cognitive predispositions (354). This process could continue until little recognizably remains of the original figure, as in the decomposition of a body; however, as a perceptual process, decomposition rarely reaches this stage because of the constantly changing nature of our environments.

Navon’s findings largely support Frith’s argument about the way that perception works for neuro-normates; in fact, several of his major points overlap with hers. For neuro-normates, “perceiving the whole facilitates the perception of its parts,” and “[d]etails are detected only to the degree that they are essential for determining contents,” according to (356). However, he diverges from Frith by using language that makes his theory of perception three-dimensional (as it should be since the worlds in which we live have at least this many dimensions). Navon acknowledges that a top-down approach is “limited” in its “depth” (368), which is a necessary result of the “economy of processing resources” (381). He also acknowledges that people can employ different cognitive styles; they are not restricted to one. As he recognizes, “[t]he visual system seems rather

to have made a decision to neglect the processing of the elements in view of the structure of the task, although it might have had enough capacity for performing a more thorough analysis” (368). These researchers use different instruments and terms and frame their findings with different language, yet these researchers arrive at generally complementary conclusions regarding the way autists and neuro-normates distribute attention.¹⁶

When reading Navon with Frith, it can be extrapolated that neuro-normates are more distant from the trees, or local features, whereas autists are closer. The latter employ a “bottom-up” model according to which “the tree is seen foveally whereas everything else is seen peripherally” (380). To ascertain depth in this model, one is assumed to be always moving “downwards, or inwards” (*OED*). By beginning at the bottom of the figurative pile of stimuli, one could be in immediate contact with whatever is at the lowest elevation—the information toward which the top-down processors are ultimately moving. However, a spatial analysis reveals that there is still depth in bottom-up processing, but it must be considered differently if one starts at the lowest level accessible within a given dimension. Ultimately, both models are restricted in the depth they can achieve. As descriptors for cognitive styles, the terms “top-down” and “bottom-up” impose misleading restrictions on the cognitive styles they describe.

Technological developments like functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have produced information that supports psychologists’ theories that autists process information differently than people without this diagnosis. This disclosure, though, adds depth to descriptions of the cognitive styles developed by psychologists like Frith and Navon. Based on maps charting the movement of energy, a growing group of studies show that autists’ brains exhibit more neural connectivity within particular regions than

neuro-normates and less or “abnormally patterned” connectivity between regions (Courchesne and Pierce 226).¹⁷ Because of these structural differences, information moves through autists’ brains differently than it does for neuro-normates.

In fact, cognitive neuroscientist Eric Courchesne, director of the UCSD Autism Center of Excellence, and his colleagues have found that individuals with autism do not shift their attention between stimuli presented in different sensory modalities as quickly as neuro-normative controls. Autists need more than the 2.5 seconds that it takes neuro-normates to switch their “spotlight of attention” (858, 849). Additionally, Matthew Belmonte and Deborah Yurgelun-Todd have found that autists experience delays when shifting attention “between spatial locations, and between object features” (651).¹⁸ Because they do not transition as smoothly, autists receive a less continuous flow of information from their environments than neuro-normates. This may explain why they often have difficulty transitioning between tasks or, as I examine here, between different topics within a literary text.

Matthew Belmonte and Deborah Yurgelun-Todd clarify how “the pattern of information flow” differs among autists and neuro-normates. As a result of their similarly structured cognitive pathways, autists experience “(1) hyper-arousal, that is, primary sensory processing that is abnormally intense and abnormally generalised across anatomical regions and functional systems and (2) impaired early selection of relevant stimuli, leading to (3) overloading of higher-order processes” when compared to neuro-normates (660). Courchesne et al. provide support for the second criterion with their suggestion that autists employ a narrower “spotlight of attention” than neuro-normates (849), while Stevenson et al. respond to the first and third criteria with their proposal that

autists have “a wider temporal binding window” (695). Autists need more time than neuro-normates and, often, specific instruction to shift their attention between stimuli—particularly from one modality (i.e., sight) to another.

The cognitive style common among autists contributes to their production of images—and, I argue, texts—that may look like they exhibit weak central coherence when judged from a normative perspective. These artists distribute their attention differently than neuro-normates may expect, focusing on stimuli that may be considered trivial as they produce literary texts that may look disjointed to neuro-normates. Framed more constructively, these individuals distribute salience differently, assigning importance to objects or stimuli that may not interest others and creating innovative connections among them. People who employ an autistic cognitive style may seem to lack control over their cognitive processing; however, the texts under analysis here demonstrate that the authors—particularly, Mukhopadhyay—deploy a significant amount of self-control when processing information and also when crafting their literary texts.

My analysis in this chapter strives to demonstrate that the cognitive styles attributed to autists and neuro-normates each have both advantages and disadvantages. As Bebko and Brown summarize, “children with autism may be preferentially attending to specific aspects of stimuli, which can lead to overselectivity, enhanced discrimination, poor generalization, and poor categorization” (734). Unexpectedly, this description gestures toward the strengths, in addition to the typically presented weaknesses, of an autistic cognitive style. For example, autists will be aware of sounds or details that neuro-normates do not perceive, and they “may see every stimulus or object as novel unless it is exactly the same as a previously viewed stimulus or object” (736). As a result, autists

“perform better than typically developing individuals on visual search tasks” (736).¹⁹

Such perceptual differences produce an image of the world that will not look the same as it does to a neuro-normate.

In *How Can I Talk?*, Mukhopadhyay presents many different moments that reveal his particular style of processing in the stimuli to which he attends and also the language that he uses to represent these situations. Each of these moments suggest a different spatial model for cognitive processing, on which Mukhopadhyay elaborates in an 2010 interview with Ralph Savarese. In it, he describes how:

with my eyes, I may select a fraction of the environment—say “that shadow of a chair” or “that door hinge over there”—and *grow my opinions and ideas around it*. This creates a defense system for my over-stimulated visual sense organ. (Call it keen observation or any other name.) Maybe poetry happens to grow around these things. (Mukhopadhyay qtd. in Savarese; emphasis mine).

Here, Mukhopadhyay proposes a multidimensional way of processing information focused on the adverb “around,” which characterizes the way that his thoughts move. His responses to an object coat its surface and expand in every direction, threatening at times to take a life of their own. However, this practice turns the object into a buffer of sorts that protects him from sensory overload. To “grow around” this object, his thoughts must be rooted in it, which means that it serves as an anchor for their multidirectional development. They move outward from it in a way that, while not rhizomatic, certainly does not produce the flat image proposed by Frith. Poetry itself becomes another layer coating the outside of the object and his ideas, which means to get at the object itself—or

the environment in which Mukhopadhyay encountered it—we must negotiate multiple layers of representation.

One of the moments that best reveals this cognitive style takes place in a railway station ticket office in Bangalore, a place with a “huge amount of movement and energy” (100). He visits the ticket office many times with his mother as he gains knowledge that helps him to form practical expectations for what he will see and experience there. Over these visits, he focuses on a static object: a mosaic. It operates as a literal and figurative anchoring point that helps him to make sense of the surrounding stimuli. He moves his attention outward in many directions like an octopus spreading its tentacles. When he looks at the situation retrospectively, he acknowledges the mosaic’s function and the intense perceptual emphasis he placed on it:

Since I could now easily recognize the door as a door and the wall as a wall
because I saw them so often, and since I no longer needed to stare at the design on
the mosaic floor and wait for Mother to narrate to me what went around on me
while I was staring hard at the floor till my eyes watered, I could look around me.
I could see the crowd and smell the crowd. (101)

The extended dependent clause with which the sentence opens captures the many trips to the railway station that took place before he reached this point; it takes the reader back to a moment when he could not arrive at these conclusions. Focusing on the mosaic while excluding other visual stimuli allowed Mukhopadhyay to integrate other stimuli into his field of vision gradually and determine their global significance at his own pace. It is one of the objects around which the author grows his ideas, and it comes to represent a defining moment in Mukhopadhyay’s development.

A person's life is made up of what he calls "moments." These segments of time are often assumed to be short, but they are actually indeterminate. In most cases, moments are "too brief to be significant," but in others, they can represent something of importance or significance, such as "a turning point" (*OED*). Through its etymological connection to the Latin *momentum*, this word retains a sense that time is always moving; our environments are constantly changing, and we with them. Within this context, Mukhopadhyay specifies that "moments are defined by what your senses are compelled to attend to" (*How* 53), as each moment contains many different possible experiences within it. Neuro-normates are likely to define a moment using only one experience or stimulus, which rises swiftly to the surface of their perception. On the contrary, Mukhopadhyay finds it easier to recognize a moment's plurality than its singularity.

This cognitive relation comes through clearly in the poetic passage that follows the statement from Mukhopadhyay quoted above. Here, he proposes several different definitions for a single moment:

A moment may include a shadow of Jack's chair falling on the floor or a pen peeping out from the pile of papers, perhaps wishing to have a voice so that it could say aloud, "Here I am! Here I am!" And within the same moment, there may be a sudden sound of laughter that can dissolve the stories told by the reflections and the sullen silence of the chair's shadow within its demanding noise, making you wonder which part of the funny story from Jack's voice you missed listening to while you were watching the giant blades of the fan pushing out every story and sound away from it with air. (53)

Mukhopadhyay creates a tension between the two sentences in this passage, which reflects the tension between the cognitive styles attributed to autists and neuro-normates. He structures the first sentence as an either/or condition, which suggests that a moment cannot include both the shadow and the pen; the perceiver can only pay attention to one of these elements. However, both this sentence and the last are constructed around a modal verb (“may”). This word choice underscores Mukhopadhyay’s assertion that a moment has many possible definitions while appearing to contradict the structure of the first sentence. The length of the second sentence and the number of different sensory elements it contains also suggest how difficult it can be for one element to rise to the top of this multitude. As a result, the perceiver exists in a constant state of processing, though she will still miss elements, such as Jack’s story.

Though he begins this passage without reference to the perceiver, Mukhopadhyay indicates that he is not only talking his own embodied situation. He makes this transition by introducing the second person (“you” and earlier “your”) in the present participle with which the second sentence ends. Here, he places the reader in the position of the perceiver. This position has much less interpretive agency than that to which a normative reader may be accustomed. Making “moment” the actor within the first sentence gives it a power that may go unacknowledged elsewhere. It places the perceiver in a reactive situation, which Mukhopadhyay compares in the next paragraph to that of a circus actor. His “senses juggl[e]” stimuli like balls—or, in some cases, knives (53). Again, Mukhopadhyay inserts a physical distance between himself and the event; it is his senses that juggle the information, not he himself. Professional jugglers are assumed to have complete control over their tools based on their ability to predict the movements of these

objects. If the objects become less “predictab[le],” the situation becomes less “comprehensi[ble],” according to Mukhopadhyay (53), and thus more dangerous.

He finds such a situation less comprehensible because it has become “more fragmented and difficult to collect all the pieces and combine them into a complete picture of the real environment” (53-4). At this moment, Mukhopadhyay reveals that he may have internalized neuro-normative judgments of his cognitive style. This assessment is supported by a later moment in which Mukhopadhyay clarifies that it is only “[w]hen [his] senses get used to a situation or a circumstance, the real image or picture starts forming....The more exposure, the better the visual image” (115). Both of these statements imply that his first impressions were false because they were incomplete; only the later image in which the environment that does not appear fragmented is “real.” Though Mukhopadhyay does not provide clarification, the real environment and image to which he refers here seem to be those seen or formed by neuro-normates.²⁰ Like a photograph, he needs “exposure” to assemble the different elements, but this process can leave him “without shelter or defense,” unprotected and vulnerable to overload (115; “Exposure,” *OED*).²¹

To avoid cognitive overload, Mukhopadhyay engages in activities like turning light switches on and off—a common interest among children with ASDs. He focuses specifically on this interest in *How Can I Talk?* and its role in helping him to manage the stimuli that he confronts. It allows him to “overlook” many sensations of which he is conscious while “eliminate[ing] other visual distractions like shadows, reflections, and the movement of the blades of the fan” (54). Like many of the words of which Derrida was so fond (e.g., *pharmakon*), the word “overlook” encapsulates a perceptual paradox in

its two seemingly contradictory senses. A person who overlooks a scene can be said to survey it “as if from above” (*OED*). This high vantage point suggests that (s)he can take in the scene as a whole without missing anything. Yet, “overlook” can also mean to leave something out, “to fail to see or observe” it (*OED*). It is this negative connotation for which “overlook” is conventionally recognized, but here the failure to see paradoxically *allows* Mukhopadhyay to see; he can only form a “complete” picture by leaving something out. With his use of this word, Mukhopadhyay indirectly refutes the normative belief that a person should be able to recognize all aspects of a situation [at once].

Mukhopadhyay recognizes that as early as age three, he used what he calls “selective vision”: “I could look at certain things but not at others. Things that calmed my senses were easier to see, while things that stressed my vision were not easy to look at.” (13). Here, he positions selective vision as an ability particular to him and not others; however, all humans rely on selective attention to manage the perceptual information that they encounter. With this phrase, though, Mukhopadhyay draws attention to the aversive response that his body produces when he looks at particular objects. A neuro-normate’s nervous system is likely to manage this decision for him, drawing his attention away from this stimulus and toward another without such palpable protest. Rather than managing the decision for him, Mukhopadhyay’s system seems to leave him to deal with it himself, and sensory processing thus requires more conscious attention.

These circumstances help to explain why Mukhopadhyay characterizes perception as a fragmented, confusing “sensory battle that was taking place within [his] nervous system” (*How* 6). In this metaphor, neurons can be read as soldiers and the action potentials that they emit as munitions. Though the battle is happening inside his body,

Mukhopadhyay appears disconnected from it because he does not position himself as an actor within it. He only gains agency within this battle by controlling particular aspects of his environment, such as the light. In so doing, he make it “predictab[le]” and thus easier to process because he has prior knowledge on which he can base his decisions (52). As he acknowledges explicitly later, “when I can predict, it is easier to attend” (98). Another of Mukhopadhyay’s preferred activities—spinning underneath a fan—has a similar effect; it allows him “to feel sure” (60). The feeling of safety created by actions like flipping a light switch or spinning helps to prevent sensory attack. Both actions give Mukhopadhyay control over his perception as he can make a room light or dark, “blurred” or clear (60).

Situations lose their predictability when new variables are introduced and Mukhopadhyay cannot control his contact with them. In one example, Mukhopadhyay remembers a pair of white leather shoes that he had when young:

New shoes made my feet look detached from the rest of me. My senses got so strained that I refused to lay my feet on the ground. I was not more than two years old then. And I remember it through the intensity of that experience, which *accumulated my senses*, all at once, merging together with *banging stress*. I refused to lay my feet on the ground. (85; emphasis mine)

These shoes pose a problem for Mukhopadhyay because they make a part of his body with which he should be familiar look strange. They seem to possess this body part in the act of covering it up, physically removing it from Mukhopadhyay’s control. Such a response is not surprising given the difficulties that many autists have with proprioception, the sense that allows us to feel where our bodies are in space. The act of

spinning mentioned earlier is one strategy that he uses to produce a more positive sense of body feeling.

The shoes become a constant presence that he cannot escape, no matter how uncomfortable they make him. When paired with their unfamiliarity, this constant presence increases the force with which Mukhopadhyay experiences stimuli in such situations. He looks to an unusual turn of phrase to describe why this situation becomes so intense: it “accumulated [his] senses.” His earlier use of “senses” suggests that here he again refers to his sensory modalities, not the meanings that he has collected. Yet, he seems to play on both meanings of the word. The content of this situation suggests that as his senses—individual sensory modalities—themselves begin to get confused, stimuli from his environment begin to build up because it is more difficult for him to deal with their heightened power. The result is a heap of information shot through with “banging stress,” or stress so powerful that it cannot be avoided. The onomatopoeia here aurally amplifies “stress,” turning an internal experience into an explosive event that can be heard by both Mukhopadhyay and the reader. It is not only Mukhopadhyay who is out of control here, but the moment itself.

Such moments “became unpredictable and too large for [his] senses to accumulate all that they involved within their field” (52). Though this description comes from a different place in the text, Mukhopadhyay again turns to the verb “accumulate” to describe the way his sense collect information from their environment. Craig Romkema attributes a similar cognitive style to autists in his poem “All Circuits Are Busy,” juxtaposing it with a neuro-normative cognitive style. He opens the poem by summarizing the position that he assumes his neuro-normative readers occupy. They

Begin at the beginning
 then continue on to the next page,
 sequentially adding...
 building blocks of knowledge. (1–4)

These individuals process progressively, moving forward or upward from an initial foundation, which Romkema equates with the conventional way of reading a book. The spatial presentation here sounds much like the top-down processing model. These neuro-normates effortlessly “add” information to already existing knowledge, “piling fact on fact” in a calm and comprehensible manner (9).

This contrasts with the perceptual position in which Romkema locates autists, whose “senses pull information into / overloaded circuits” (10–11). Because of circuits’ circular shape, energy cannot exit them once inside; therefore, “overloaded circuits” would be characterized by a lack of movement caused by a “pile-up” of information. To prevent occlusion, Romkema must actively sort through an alliterative “plethora of puzzling sensations” (12). In this case, the number and kind of sensations has a pejorative inflection, as *plethora* does in its medical sense, referring to vessels too full of blood. If they are unable to keep up with this information, processing it as it comes, we assume that autists receive the error message contained in the title: “All Circuits are Busy.” In such situations, individuals feel “befuddled” (15); they cannot think clearly because of the build-up of stimuli.

This is a danger of the tendency described by Mukhopadhyay “to overinclude many components within or outside the limits of [his] surroundings into the permeability of [his] mind” (203). He composes mental maps that are too complex; they contain too

many parts, too many connections rather than too few. Mukhopadhyay directly relates this cognitive style to the way he processes sensory stimuli elsewhere in *How Can I Talk?* He proposes that he “either over-see[s] or under-see[s] the components of the environment” (98). This description indirectly compares Mukhopadhyay’s processing bias to a standard style whose employer would see just enough. Based on his suggestions elsewhere, this standard appears to be set by neuro-normates. Thus, he devalues his perceptions on the basis of their accordance with the way in which neuro-normates would see the same environment. They are either excessive or insufficient and “can be very different from what my body is supposed to experience in my physical environment” (208).

Romkema captures an affective response to this situation in “Frustration,” which describes the author’s continuous efforts to prevent overload. In this poem, the author compares the narrator’s cognitive style to “looking for needles in / Gigantic haystacks” (22–23), a conventional simile that conveys the seemingly endless nature of processing information for him. The narrator of this poem wants but does not have control over this environment, and as he strives for it, he lives in a state that he likens to “an eternal spring cleaning” (11). Most people undertake this project once per year because it requires so much time and effort, but the narrator—and other autists, by implication—are always spring cleaning, never just “cleaning” or existing in a clean space.

In keeping with this domestic metaphor, Romkema compares a person’s “mind” to his bedroom (8). The narrator arranges details like objects in this room and keeps returning to ensure they have not moved. This is “the only way [he] can sleep” or relax

(27), for as Romkema underscores at the poem's close, "playing my nailing-down-each-thing-in-the-room game / Isn't a game" (25–26); it is much more serious.

You see, we know every detail
 In the pictures of our minds,
 Thousand of details to sort out,
 Keep organized... (7–10)

The magnitude of this situation lies not just in the number of stimuli to be cataloged but also in the importance of existing in a predictable environment. Autists engage in this behavior because, according to Romkema, it "keep[s] us sane" (29). The consequences of allowing one's room, i.e., mind, to fall into disorder are dire, so despite how "exhausting" it can be (18), the spring cleaning must continue indefinitely.

When Romkema cannot keep his room organized, cannot keep up with the stimuli that must be processed, he finds himself "left behind," a situation that he describes in "Free-Fall":

In the hurry-up of this world,
 people like me get left behind.
 Conversations are about speed,
 ...
 I cannot jump in fast enough before
 They are off to the next topic. (4–6, 8–9)

The narrator stands out in this environment characterized by "speed," urgency, and confusion. "People like him" cannot move quickly enough to keep up with the flow—they are too slow—so they are discarded and forgotten. At the poem's end, Romkema

uses a more specific metaphor to capture the different literal and figurative ways in which neuro-normates and autists move; he writes, “I live in free-fall; they are taking the Concorde” (17). In this line, neuro-normates move much faster than autists toward socially valued goals, protected by convention and their cognitive style, which function respectively as a plane’s hull and a pilot with experience navigating the route. Conversely, autists are more vulnerable, out of control, influenced more immediately by the physical conditions of their environment.

Neuro-normates are accustomed to having their perceptual systems actively control the stimuli that they recognize. Many of the stimuli present in their environments are automatically identified as irrelevant and thus minimized. Among those stimuli that they actively recognize, neuro-normates typically arrive at similar assessments regarding the importance of these elements. This occurs because they share a common style of cognitive organization and because these structures allow them to access the social world in similar ways and on similar timelines. In most cases, such attributions of relevance are relative, though recognizing danger is one area where these subconscious assessments have inherent and innate value.²² Neuro-normates are so familiar with having their determinations affirmed by those around them that they are easily surprised when another person questions their attributions. Aggressive reactions are not uncommon because such questions undermine the social contract that places these basic agreements beyond the realm of doubt.

As they describe in their literature, autists like Mukhopadhyay and Lawson are familiar with such reactions, and they respond with the same surprise when others question their own attributions. For instance, Lawson describes a situation in which a

teacher reprimands her for not paying attention to the content being discussed in her math class: “Ms Smith’s words made no sense to me. I was paying attention, I thought. I was paying attention to the tree outside the window. Its leaves were all shiny in the sunlight” (33). What Lawson does not recognize at this time is the implication behind the teacher’s statement—she is not paying attention to the lesson, *which is more important*. No doubt Lawson would have disagreed with this assessment, but because the teacher holds a position of authority, ultimately it is her assessment that matters. Many children without autism diagnoses are caught in similar situations. They can and are physically paying attention, but they are not attending to the object or information valued by the authority figure.

Similar moments in which Lawson distributes salience differently than others assume she will appear at two other points in *Life Behind Glass*. First, Lawson crafts a vivid passage in which she presents “bath time” as “a wonderful dreamscape” (34). Despite the obvious pleasure the experience has given her, the passage opens with her mother chiding her for not accomplishing the ostensible goal of a bath: cleaning her body. The author still tries to explain why she has not done what her mother expected: “Mum, see how round the bubbles are. Just look at the colours!” (34). Lawson does not describe the result of her supplication to consider the bubbles’ sensory aspects; however, one can imagine that the response was less enthusiastic.

At another moment, Lawson must sit for a school exam while hospitalized. She remembers being “told it was important to [her] education that [she] concentrate and work to the best of [her] ability” (42), but no one clarified *why* this test was important; neither did they explain how she should complete the test. Instead of taking it, she “drew

on the paper, played ‘noughts and crosses’ and felt very anxious” because she “had told one of the nurses earlier that [she] would roll some bandages for her and [she] felt that really *was* important” (42). Again, Lawson does not understand the reason why this event should matter to her. Therefore, she does not give it the same consideration as a neuro-normates would.

Mukhopadhyay describes a similar moment where he attended to stimuli that interested him because they made him feel calm. In reflecting on it, he recognizes the difference between his approach with that which a neuro-normate is likely to take. He writes:

Once, in Bangalore, I visited a house and sat on a comfortable sofa in the drawing room. People who knew of my love for magazines would keep magazines for me because I loved to turn and touch those smooth glossy pages. On that day, I was sniffing each page of every magazine. I was so absorbed in smelling the pages that I missed seeing the piano, framed photographs, and lace curtains. I realized their presence, long after we had left that room... (98-9).

When visiting someone’s home, most neuro-normates would not sit looking at a magazine without talking to anyone. But, Mukhopadhyay is not even looking at the pages—he is *smelling* them. He does not acknowledge here that this is not a normative approach to interacting with a magazine, but the final list of other objects present in the same room, objects that would attract the attention of many neuro-normates, indicates that he does recognize the unconventional direction of his attention. Other people would look at the different objects present in the room. Instead, Mukhopadhyay focuses his attention on a single object.

His unusual sensory interaction with this magazine is not the only instance of such behavior. He takes a similar approach to reading a book:

I might turn the pages and sniff each page first before looking at the pictures in it because I believe in finding out first, as a ritual, how old that book is and how many hands have turned the pages of that book before me. Someone else with autism may tear a page or two, for who knows which dominant unit of experience is taking place in his perception. Another person with autism may totally ignore the presence of that book because his perceptions would be directed toward some other aspect of the environment. (202)

In this passage, Mukhopadhyay recognizes the diversity of interests among individuals with ASDs, while uniting them based on the fact that they all distribute their attention according to different rules than neuro-normates. When encountering a book, neuro-normates default to sight: read a few pages in the middle, look at the title and publication information, or scan the author's biography. The book's smell interests Mukhopadhyay more than the semantic content of its words, an unconscious preference that many neuro-normates will not understand.

Despite the attractive power of these examples, the distinctness of Mukhopadhyay's cognitive style also comes through in way that he structures the language that uses to describe his processing. Let us return to the first sentence that I examined as a moment that captures the author's processing style (see page 17 of this chapter); it describes the culmination of many trips to the railway ticket office—the fact that Mukhopadhyay can now “look around” (101). This sentence merits further attention when compared to other sentences in the text, which contrast in style. The authors of *The*

King's English (1906) suggest that “a gathering of commas (except on certain lawful occasions, as in a list) is a suspicious circumstance” (H.W. and F.G. Fowler. qtd. in Lukeman 53), and their analysis provides the instigation for this examination.

Sentences like this one are uncommon within *How Can I Talk?*, where sentences typically contain a single independent clause, such as: “I would continue to think about the mirror” or “I would wonder about the mirror upstairs” (8). When Mukhopadhyay makes sentences more complex, they are typically compound sentences: two independent clauses with only one comma or a sentence with a single modifier, such as a relative clause or a participle phrase—as in, “My voice would scream, and I would wonder whether the mirror upstairs was aware of my screaming” (8). This consistent grammatical approach makes more complex sentences with multiple commas stand out. As with the sentence about the ticket office, these unusual sentences typically capture moments where Mukhopadhyay describes his cognitive processing. The dependent clause stretches out, representing the extended time in which he stared at the mosaic in 63 words. It contrasts markedly with the five-word independent clause that capture the simple conclusion at which he has arrived. The first part of the sentence includes information that could normatively be described as parenthetical, or beside the point, but it captures the long period of time that Mukhopadhyay focused on the mosaic.

Another sentence whose structure reflects the time Mukhopadhyay devotes to sensory processing captures the aural experience of living in Bangalore. The Fowlers identify lists as more “lawful” uses for many commas, yet this one presents eight distinct sounds that are more detailed than the reader may expect for their presentation within a single sentence. As Mukhopadhyay writes,

the sounds of any day would be the sound of traffic on the main road outside the houses, the sound of the temple bell ringing across the street, the sound of a loudspeaker announcing the coming of a political leader, the sound of a vegetable vendor, the sound of women bargaining with a vendor from an open window, the sound of someone's television set, the sound of an infant crying along with the sound of street dogs arguing about some sensitive issue around an open garbage can. I mixed in that sound, the music from my tape recorder and the faint sound of the ceiling fan. I could not hear anything less. (*How* 67)

As Mukhopadhyay presents them here, these sounds do not create the cacophony that one might expect. The structure of the first sentence—as an eight-sound list—suggests that he hears each one distinctly and recognizes them in a linear fashion, one after the other. The commas create a space between each sound and a pause that represents Mukhopadhyay's transition from processing one to the next. The sounds presented in the first sentence become one in the second, as suggested by their grammatical merger into “that sound.” It is unclear whether they become the same kind of singular entity when consciously “mixed” with two others after, but Mukhopadhyay's word choice suggests that the elements remain distinct in their combination.

Mukhopadhyay explicitly contrasts his cognitive style with a more neuro-normative style—embodied here by his mother—within the chapter “How Do You Perceive a Linear Situation?” The title of this chapter evokes a question that the author was asked, yet it introduces a pivotal direct object here: “linear situation” (*How* 93). This spatial phrase has particular relevance here. In mathematical terms, the adjective “linear” suggests that a pattern exists among the different elements of which the situation is

comprised; they share a unifying element that turns them into a line. Yet, this word also suggests that the situation is one-dimensional; it lacks depth as does the line that constitutes one side of a figure or a line of text. Within this context, the question with which Mukhopadhyay opens the chapter implies that a linear situation is basic, not complex, flat. By comparing the ways in which he and his mother process information, though, he reveals that few situations are linear, and to locate a line, one must see only one dimension.

In this chapter, Mukhopadhyay asks the same question of his mother, placing his mother's description of the way she processes information adjacent to his own.²³ The differences between them introduce depth into what could be read as linear situations. First, he represents the many different thoughts or feelings that his mother had "when she saw a book" in the form of a bulleted list (94). This method of presentation (which the author uses no other place in the text) creates an effect similar to but different from lists presented within a single sentence, such as the list of sounds discussed above. Both methods are linear, but the bulleted list introduces more physical separation between each piece of information than a comma does within a sentence. This spacing contributes to the function that bullets often serve: increasing access to information by (hypothetically) increasing the speed with which it can be processed. Yet, this format directs the reader to move from the top of the list, where the author provides framing information, to the bottom, while a sentence asks the reader to move from left to right, and then to begin again directly below.

When Mukhopadhyay presents a wide view of his own cognitive style, he again turns to a more complex sentence structure, as discussed earlier.

When I enter a new room, which I am entering for the first time, and look at a door, I recognize it as a door, only after a few stages. The first thing I see is its color. If I do not get into a deeper cogitation of its color by defining it as “yellow,” and mentally lining up all the yellow things I know of, including one of my yellow tennis balls when I was seven years old, I move to the shape of the door. And if at all I lay my eyes on the door hinge, I might get distracted by the functions of levers. However, I pull my attention from there and wonder about the function of that yellow, large rectangular object, with levers of the first order, called a hinge.

Why is that yellow, large rectangular object with levers there? I mentally answer the question, “It has allowed me to come inside that room, and can be opened or closed. And what else can that be other than a door.” My labeling is complete. And I move onto the next object in the room to find its characteristics, then define and label that object. (94-5)

In this passage, Mukhopadhyay presents his cognitive style as a linear process in which he moves through a series of “stages.” When applied literally, this word refers to a story within a building, a step on a ladder, or another “horizontal partition” within a structure that is ultimately vertical (*OED*). The stages that he outlines here begin with color and then move onto shape and function—an object’s “characteristics”—before he finally arrives at a name for the object. “Stage,” as a word choice, along with the sentence-style presentation, makes Mukhopadhyay’s description seem to follow the spatial progression suggested by “bottom-up” processing.

However, this application is too simple. As Mukhopadhyay charts the overall direction of his cognitive movement, he also notes the places where he may pause in his progress. It is easy to feel the power of Mukhopadhyay's associative powers here, for even as he describes the act of *not* pursuing associations, he provides a very specific example of the kind of association that he would make in the memory of his old tennis ball. At this moment, he would "mentally lin[e] up" objects that shared a characteristic with this one. Neuro-normates would call this pause in his movement toward the object's name a digression—particularly as Mukhopadhyay's line extends in a different direction than the path that he had been following. As he suggests by describing this moment as "a deeper cogitation," such reflections add depth to the process and separate it from the simplified idea of "bottom-up" processing.

Such multidimensional excursions evoke a section from Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (2006) in which she contrasts her cognitive style with a style more common among neuro-normates. According to Grandin, "Unlike those of most people, my thoughts move from video-like, specific images to generalization and concepts. For example, my concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I have ever known" (12). Based on this description, Grandin advances from the specific to the general, whereas neuro-normates move from the general to the specific; they "see a generalized generic church rather than specific churches and steeples when they read or hear the word *steeple*" (11). Because she can recall precise instances, Grandin compares her memory to "a CD-ROM disc" and each memory to a "video" on that disk that she can replay at will (8). Her description of this cognitive style sounds not

unlike Mukhopadhyay's earlier presentation of his own, when he could list "all the yellow things [he] know[s] of," though he does not.

Grandin explicitly treats this cognitive style as a virtue of "[b]eing autistic" throughout *Thinking in Pictures*. Of all of the authors whose literature is analyzed here, she is the most emphatic in her proposal that while different, this cognitive style is neither a deficit nor a reason to pathologize autists. In fact, she implicitly criticizes neuro-normates for "naturally assimilate[ing] information and tak[ing it] for granted" (8). Within this context, it is surprising that Grandin cites a line from an autism memoir by Charles Hart without questioning the way it frames autistic processing. According to Hart, his son "Ted's thought processes aren't logical, they're associational" (qtd. in *Thinking* 9). Grandin does not question the false distinction that Hart sets up here between association from logic, though it undermines her perspective. The quotations cited in this chapter from Mukhopadhyay, Lawson, and Grandin demonstrate that autists do employ a particular form of associative logic, though it may not be a normative one. It does not move the same way that neuro-normative logic is assumed to move.

This unconventional way of moving is also captured in the way Seth Chwast, a visual artist with an ASD, describes his art. When he completes a piece, he writes a formulaic description that lists the different colors present in this image. In his mother's memoir, *An Unexpected Life* (2011), these descriptions look like Mukhopadhyay's sound sentence; however, this image (see Figure 4) from his blog demonstrates that at least in this instance the statement includes a cluster of words that defies the linear progression of his text sentences. He could have indented the words that begin the lines layered above and below "reds, pale vermilions, oranges," but he does not. This method of presentation

breaks the conventional sequence of the sentence with a mass of words. From a neuro-normative perspective, it looks like a blood clot within a vessel, blocking the sentence's linear progression as the text swells around it.

Many neuro-normates display serious concern about such blockages in an autistic's forward progress. Mukhopadhyay captures such concerns in another part of his interview with Savarese, when talking again about his cognitive style:

I may say this about my processing—it may make me disassociate myself from the totality of the situation and select one aspect of it. After that I may be completely within a labyrinth with my overindulgence or overassociation in that single aspect of the environment that has multiple aspects, making me ignore the other parts of the situation. (Mukhopadhyay qtd. in Savarese)

As he demonstrated earlier, Mukhopadhyay has a tendency to focus on one element within an environment and use it as an anchoring point for his attempts at global processing. Normative concerns about this method are reflected in the negative inflection of several words that he uses here—in particular, “disassociate,” “labyrinth,” and the use of “over-” as a modifying prefix. All of these establish his style as non-normative and as having potentially harmful effects, mostly related to his ability to engage with plurality.

Yet, other examples from the text show that Mukhopadhyay has no issue pursuing associations to other ideas or objects from this anchoring point; however, he may not arrive at the conclusion valued by neuro-normates. This issue appears prominently in an encounter Mukhopadhyay describes with the equation “ $4 + 2 = ?$ ” at an American school (154). He mentally turns these numbers and the operations sign into points plotted on an x-y axis and locates coordinates that would make them a line. In the process, he discovers

“a whole story of number characters other than merely 2 and 4, competing, quarreling, and asserting themselves to be written down” (*How* 155). While he does write an answer for the equation above, it is not the one that the teacher wanted: a normative reading of this line. Yet, this seemingly simple addition equation opens a multidimensional (specifically, four) field of coordinates, “which kept [his] mind and sense entertained for the rest of the day” (156). Though it may be a “labyrinth” with the danger to segregate him from normative conclusions, it is full of creative ideas and productive ideas that throw off the restrictions imposed by conventional cognitive styles.

Like labyrinths, literary texts that do not follow the conventions of their genre can equally bewildering to their readers. Most of the texts under analysis here appear to be written as novels—prose that follows a chapter-based format—though Romkema’s work is a notable exception. Their approach begins with an element as basic as the table of contents, but one that is important in this analysis of spatial processing and textual distribution. Typically, this element provides a summary of the text’s content and outlines the trajectory of events as they unfold. One of the objectives behind assembling this element is to make the text’s content more accessible to the reader. As Pliny the Elder famously argued, “the public good requires that you [the reader] should be spared as much as possible from all trouble,” and within this context, a table of contents ensures that the reader can exert less effort in understanding a) what information each chapter contains and b) how the different chapters fit together. It (assumedly) gives the reader a sense of the whole that enables her to more effectively navigate the text.

As a textual element, the table of contents operates based on a series of assumptions regarding the way in which the reader will process the information contained

within the text. Many textual norms, such as the table of contents, are assumed to present this information in the most “manageable” way. Traditionally, chapters may be labeled with only numbers or with text that summarizes their contents and/or attracts the reader’s attention. When writing these titles, the author must assume that she knows what the reader will look for within the text and what will attract his or her interest. The organization of these titles within the table itself reflects the overall organization of information within the text. Chapters may be organized based on chronology or common themes as “a main division” of information within a book (*OED*). This definition suggests that a chapter should contain significant content, in the sense that it is important to the overall trajectory of the book and/or meaningful in size.

As narratives, Wendy Lawson’s *Life Behind Glass* and Temple Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures* are arranged according to more traditional formats than Tito Mukhopadhyay’s *How Can I Talk?*. For instance, Lawson’s text adheres more closely to the *bildungsroman*-esque narrative expected of memoirs. It begins with an introduction, “This Is My Story,” then moves onto chapters whose titles chart her chronological development through conventional major life events: “My First Take On Life,” “School Intrudes,” “Teenage Dreams And Fears,” “Farewell to Childhood,” and so on. Though these chapters contain information composed in ways that readers may not anticipate, the table of contents itself suggests that this may be just another coming-of-age story. Yet, Lawson does not get to her birth until the third chapter. By this point, she has already talked about her father’s death (when she was an adult), her difficulty making friends, and her sensory preferences, among other topics.

Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* follows a more conventional structure; as suggested by the table of contents, it is organized thematically according to major topics like empathy, religion, and relationships. Also evident in Daniel Tammet's *Embracing the Wide Sky*, this approach evokes the format more often used by academic research, though the texts themselves show that Grandin and Tammett still introduce information about themselves within this format. Analysis of Grandin's text also reveals that her chapters contain many different sections. One of the most extreme instances of this practice occurs in the third chapter, "The Squeeze Machine: Sensory Problems in Autism." Here, Grandin breaks the text into 13 different sections, which equates to about two pages per section (in reality, the distribution is more variable). Introducing sections can help the reader to navigate the information a chapter contains, but they can also break the flow of the narrative. It is particularly intriguing that this chapter contains so many sections since Grandin's information processing is where I see this organizational tendency originating.

The most unusual text within this context is Mukhopadhyay's *How Can I Talk?*, which contains 211 pages separated into 59 chapters, with an additional foreword, author's note, and an epilogue of sorts. That is roughly 3.5 pages per chapter—a very small number of pages, in conventional terms, to be separated into distinct chapters. In part because of the number of chapters, the table of contents can be overwhelming for a reader. The complexity of the chapter titles also compounds the feeling of confusion a reader is likely to experience as most chapter titles (41) contain four words or more. Additionally, Mukhopadhyay does not use a consistent grammatical format throughout. Some proximate chapters have similar formats, such as "The Color of Basic Words" and

“The Color of My Scream” or “Perceiving Faces” and “Everyday Faces.” However, the most consistent link between these titles is their reflection of the topic treated within the chapter. Neither this topic nor the way in which Mukhopadhyay treats it may be apparent from the chapter title itself, which means that the connections between the chapters themselves will not be obvious to most readers until after they complete the text.²⁴

Beginning with their tables of contents, these texts highlight a consistent theme that runs through much literature written by autists: these texts may feel uneven to readers accustomed to more normative narratives. I mean this in the sense that these texts appear to be constantly changing topics, full of non sequiturs, lacking the segues or transitions that one may expect from such narratives. This approach may make their texts appear to fit the model of weak central coherence proposed by Frith; however, close analysis reveals that the authors follow particular logics that—while they may be more personal and less communal than normative logics—are locatable if the reader devotes time to serious analysis. This is the same kind of extended engagement that autists pursue on a daily basis in environments structured by and for neuro-normates.

Another aesthetic approach taken by Lawson, Mukhopadhyay, and another author, Dawn Prince-Hughes, have an effect similar to Grandin’s use of sections; these authors move with more (Mukhopadhyay) or less (Lawson) frequency between poetry and prose. These transitions are different from moments when, for instance, Prince-Hughes quotes the first poem she wrote within her text. In that case, the poem was an artifact related to a story that she was telling. The first three poems in her text are treated as such, as objects from the past that further elucidate the plot she is conveying, as are some later poems (137). Gradually, however, she begins to integrate them more into the

text so that they function as a continuation of the narrative in a different genre (64-5, 68, 107, 123-24).

Unlike Prince-Hughes, Lawson does not frame the appearance of a poem with a description of its relation to the narrative; the text merely flows from prose to poetry (81, 104, 128) and often back again (98, 101-2, 106-7, 111-112). As the citations indicate, these moments of generic fusion are concentrated toward the end of Lawson's text. This poetic development may unfold thus for one of several reasons: By this point in the narrative, Lawson herself may have become more comfortable with the writing process and as a result more comfortable experimenting with the form in which she presents her narrative. This explanation is likely too simple because she no doubt revised the text and could have returned to the earlier sections to add poems. Another possibility is that Lawson feels by this point in the narrative she has established her credibility as a writer sufficiently that she can begin to experiment without her reader questioning her mastery of prose. As the text's title suggests, Lawson feels public scrutiny acutely. Finally, these poetic experiments begin to appear with the birth of Lawson's first child, which seems to mark a turning point of sorts for her.

As often happens, the author who takes this literary technique to its most extreme is Mukhopadhyay, and he reflects on the use of this technique in an interview with Ralph James Savarese, who has worked extensively with the author. Savarese asks him to "account for the practice of 'interrupting' prose with a fragment of poetry," and Mukhopadhyay provides the following response:

I use verse when I get bored of writing a dragging paragraph. I usually do.

Sometimes the topic becomes too thick and intense to write. I get nagged by this

boring state that the topic holds for me. Because of that, I seek a way out to recharge my senses. A verse makes me free. A verse recharges my senses. And a verse can distract the eyes and ears of a reader. It is easy to read it that way. (qtd. in Savarese, “More”)

In this passage, Mukhopadhyay proposes that he switches from prose to verse when writing about a subject that “bore[s]” and “drag[s],” yet “nag[s]” him (note the rhyme that connects the second two words). His language here transforms an abstract idea into an object that requires more effort than normal to move. Because of the time and energy required, he is likely to lose interest in the task of representing this information, yet he has trouble leaving it behind. It eats away at him²⁵; he cannot escape it, and it becomes even more difficult to address as it gains intensity.

Mukhopadhyay aligns intensity with “thickness,” which is typically considered an attractive characteristic. Thick ideas are interesting *because of* their depth, and thin ideas reciprocally are boring because they lack this quality. It is less conventional to find something thick boring, as Mukhopadhyay does; yet, he appears to be playing on the dull but persistent quality that unites “bore” with “nag.” He cannot escape the topic because of its depth, because it contains innumerable possibilities, which cause it to become too intense to manage in prose. Within this context, switching to a different literary genre has the potential to liberate both Mukhopadhyay and his language. The transition to poetry releases Mukhopadhyay from the restrictions imposed by prose itself—having to form his words into complete sentences, for instance. He can then treat the topic from within a system with different conventions for language use. It also provides an escape

mechanism whereby Mukhopadhyay's senses, weakened by the experience of processing information related to this topic, can regain their strength through this apparent diversion.

Within this context, Savarese's decision to frame Mukhopadhyay's transition from prose to poetry with the word "interrupt" is a curious one.²⁶ This verb has a pejorative sense in which interruptions should be avoided, particular within a social context. Though perhaps inadvertent, Savarese positions Mukhopadhyay's stylistic approach as one that breaks the flow of the text in a negative way. From the author's description, though, this literary technique *continues* the text's flow. It redirects the flow of language through another conduit for, in most cases, the short poems recapitulate the ideas presented earlier in the prose. This analysis of Mukhopadhyay's statement makes sense because the greatest number of poems in *How Can I Talk?* appear within chapters (20), while even those that end (13) or begin (5) a chapter can be said to continue the narrative's flow.

Mukhopadhyay's reflection here provides insight into a similar approach taken by Prince-Hughes and Lawson. The literary technique of moving from prose to verse and back appears to help these authors transition from one idea or topic to the next, to leave one behind in favor of another. As the etymology of this term reminds us, a transition helps the reader to cross the physical gap that separates one chapter or paragraph from another. From this perspective, they can be thought of as bridges or as the "the glue that binds the components of your argument or discussion into a unified, coherent, and persuasive whole," according to the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina ("Transitions"). These moments are often indicated by specific words, including "for example" and "however," and they may grow to include an entire idea that connect one

discussion or concept to another. By uniting different parts of a text, “transitions tell readers what to do with the information you present to them” (“Transitions”). In other words, they communicate to your reader how she should process and organize this information.

Individuals with ASDs are frequently described as having difficulty making transitions from one activity to another, and literary transitions have an important relation to this discussion. Lawson explicitly addresses this issue: “I am always surprised when something comes to an end....While the event is occurring I feel part of it, but when it ceases then I cease to be too” (107). The consequences that she depicts here are severe, a disintegration akin to death; thus, it is no wonder that Lawson and other feel anxiety around transitions if they experience these events so negatively. Therefore, the high stakes in something that may seem as simple as moving from one topic to another may require extreme aesthetic strategies—such as the transition to verse.

With a behavioral example that is similar to but not the same as this literary example, Lawson recognizes one strategy that she uses to mitigate her anxiety: “I will keep some parts of a situation before change occurs, and take them with me into the change. This way, the change is felt as less powerful and I am still in control. For example, I might choose to wear my leather and canvas runners and my red socks, even though the weather forecast is 30°C” (109). As in this case, Lawson has learned to physically manipulate aspects of her environment over which she has control to create continuity and make herself more comfortable. Such continuity makes change more manageable, and this is exactly the kind of description that one could apply to a normative transition in narrative form. The writer takes some part of the topic with him

into the change to make the passage smoother, to create continuity. Still, convention dictates that an author relinquish it soon after the transition happens, which is where Lawson's strategy goes too far for normative tastes. When confronting these strategies in person, Lawson's motivations may seem strange to a normative reader. Though she may be overheated by her clothing choice, she will be comforted in other ways.

Life Behind Glass contains many instances in which Lawson changes topic in what may seem to many an abrupt manner. For instance, in the first chapter, she moves from food textures to autistic children who do not recognize danger when they should and then back to sensory appreciation. In other areas, she moves from eye contact to conventional interpersonal relationships, misunderstandings with her family to her difficulty making friends as a child, her father's refusal to visit her in the hospital to her difference from other people, and metaphor to human relationships. From their adjacent and simplified presentation here, these topics may not appear as disconnected as they seem within the text. Many of these absent transitions are marked with a single dot, which serves as a section break (or dinkus) and a visible indication that the author is changing topics. As the book proceeds, Lawson uses these breaks more sporadically. This decision has the effect of placing different sections of text in closer proximity and making their difference more surprising.

Before Lawson phases out the section break, she chooses not to place one in an area appears where I would have assumed to see it. She is concluding a story about leaving her house to walk to the beach as a small child. Lawson writes,

Jenny walked over to the damp remaining seashore and picked me up. I had not noticed that while I was sitting there, the tide had come in and my isolated sand dune was now the only sand visible above sea level.

I always needed to be on the move. Even when I was made to sit still on a chair, I had to rock it. If I sat on the floor, I needed to rock myself and suck the roof of my mouth... (24)

The space between these two paragraphs marks a missing transition between Lawson's two-page story about her trip to the ocean and the intensity of her need to move. These two topics could be connected by the rationale that Lawson left the house to go to the ocean because of her need to move; however, she does not make this connection clear as a normative reader would expect in the immediate movement between paragraphs.

The space between these two paragraphs is magnified by the looming presence of the *hors-texte*: that which Lawson leaves unsaid. The event that she describes was a potentially traumatic one; thus, the space could be read psychoanalytically as all that she is repressing here. Yet, such spaces appear throughout the text because of its block format, which is more typical of a business letter than a literary text. Because of the physical separation this format introduces between each paragraph, it gives the impression that the paragraphs are even more conceptually disconnected, each dealing with a new, different, and—by the end of the paragraph—complete idea.²⁷ Whether or not the reader consciously recognizes it, this aesthetic choice suggests that these paragraphs may have a different relationship to each other than those in a normatively constructed text.

Despite the prevalence of such absent transitions, Lawson also demonstrates that she knows how to use normative transitions. For instance, the first page of *Life Behind Glass*'s introduction contains the following passage:

Throughout my life I have been unable to identify, understand and express my emotions, and so have always felt misunderstood and alienated from those around me. Because I appear to be "different", confused and a misfit, I have been often treated as if I am either deaf or stupid.

I am neither. I simply find the world around me difficult to comprehend...

(i).

Here, Lawson connects these two paragraphs according to a normative logic. She closes the first paragraph with an assumption that other people have about her and then opens the next by refuting this assumption and providing an alternative explanation. This strategy draws attention to her voice in a situation where others have historically defined her, as does the three-word sentence, which stands out among so many more complex sentences.

Though *How Can I Talk?* follows a more topical course, it conveys a **restlessness** that is similar to the feeling a normative reader is likely to experience when reading *Life Behind Glass*. Some chapters are connected by Mukhopadhyay's interest in staircases, for example, light (shadows, light switches), or clothing (shirts, specifically). Others exhibit much less continuity between them, as with the movement from a doctor's office visit to learning to play with blocks (42-3). Though his text contains many of what could be called digressions, they feel much less like digressions because the text itself follows a less conventional structure than Lawson's; it indicates from the outset (i.e., the table of

contents or the foreword) that some work will be necessary to follow the author's train of thought. For instance, as he tells a story about climbing stairways in an Indian railway station, Mukhopadhyay spends a paragraph discussing the function of railway porters in India (38). He then returns without a second look to his story about stairways and shadows. Such topics or events are accorded importance by virtue of their inclusion in the text, but the author often does not specifically indicate *why* they are important or *for what purpose*.

Like Lawson, Mukhopadhyay also demonstrates that he has the ability to craft a normative transition. This ability manifests itself at the end of the chapter "Unpredictability," where Mukhopadhyay continues to focus on his interest in light switches. He closes it by describing how his "fancy had moved toward ceiling fans" (58). The next chapter's title, "The Power of a Ceiling Fan to Make Me Feel Sure," reflects the expected shift in the narrative's focus, as do the first two lines: "India is a tropical country. Most of the year, ceiling fans are needed" (59). These objects are the focus of the next two chapters and an element in the third. Mukhopadhyay concludes the last by circling back his prior interest: "And what happened to the remaining part of my story about the fan? Nothing further...because I was invited that monsoon month of July to the United States, never again to be bothered by power outages and suffocating heat" (69). Though it diverges from his discussion of tape-recorded music, this topical return provides closure to his discussion of this interest, and a transition to stories about his life in the United States feels imminent. Despite this expectation, the next chapter is about Mukhopadhyay's food-related sensory preferences. Within the span of fifteen pages,

Mukhopadhyay presents both conventional and unconventional transitions, meeting and defying normative expectations.

This compositional trend reflects the fact that Mukhopadhyay and Lawson often pursue non-normative logics, which can make the connections that they draw between particular ideas or topics look like non sequiturs. For instance, Mukhopadhyay's third major interest—which appears in the chapter discussed above—has a more obscure relation to ceiling fans than light switches do. The fans allowed Mukhopadhyay to tell at a glance or by feeling the movement of air whether the power had turned off, and power was essential for the switches to function properly. As with many of his textual transitions, though, the relation between ceiling fans and “music from tape recorders” may not be as obvious to the reader as it is to Mukhopadhyay (66). He tells the reader how he could hear the ceiling fan in the background of the music to which he listened on tape recorder at home. By providing this information, Mukhopadhyay lays bare his logic here for the reader's benefit.

This example of a personal logic at work closely resembles an example Leo Kanner provides in his seminal article, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” (1944). Kanner draws attention to instances in which statements made by his subjects “could not be linked up with immediate situations” (227). When summarizing one child's case, Kanner presents a situation in which “At the sight of a saucepan he [Paul] would invariably exclaim, ‘Peter-eater’” (227). This association does not make sense to Kanner or the child's mother, until she “remembered that this particular association had begun when he was 2 years old and she happened to drop a saucepan while reciting to him the nursery rhyme about ‘Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater’” (227). Though the saucepan and

nursery rhyme may not seem related—and are thus dissonant when considered adjacently—knowing the child’s history enables Kanner and the mother to see a connection between the two events.

Such a personal logic also connects the chapters “Everyday Faces” and “Magazine Pictures” in *How Can I Talk?*. The former presents the way that Mukhopadhyay experiences the presence of two people who have played important roles in his life: Deepa, his speech language pathologist, and his teacher in Austin. He experiences the presence of the latter as a particular image—“a yellow plastic bowl with a wide circumference” (111)—and the next chapter focuses on physical images. In the opening of the latter, he indirectly compares static images to the perceptual images he forms in interactions with particular people, which draws out the “threatening” nature of the latter; they are threatening because they “expec[t] a dialogue” (112). To follow this comparison, the reader must accept the fact that what we perceive when interacting with a person, the sensory image or map that we receive, is an interpretation of that person, which means that they can radically differ on an individual basis. The image need not be visual or even representational in the way to which we may be accustomed.

The literary texts discussed in this chapter demonstrate that autists occupy a complicated position: they have different sensory interests than neuro-normates, of which they are often aware, and their cognitive structures predispose them to sensory overload, making it difficult to assemble a mental map that mirrors those created by neuro-normates. Consequently, autists are left “juggling” sensations (53), in Mukhopadhyay’s turn of phrase, as they try to keep their own balance while balancing the relations between their sensations and relations with other people.

One of the central goals of this section has been to clarify the ways in which the artists with ASDs in this minor literature describe their own processing styles—often, in relation to neuro-normates—and the images that they form of their environments. Consequently, the kind of coherence that is valued by neuro-normates is more difficult for them to achieve and requires more conscious effort. According to these norms, we should be constantly looking for the big picture, integrating a stimulus with others within a very particular frame and widening our focus in specific ways. Such a perspective presumes that perception is uncomplicated and effortless, that particulars are unimportant except as means to an end. Even though autistic images of their environments appear fragmented according to neuro-normative standards for perception, authors like Mukhopadhyay and Grandin demonstrate that they contain information that can lead in many different dimensions.

Perception is a complex process whose end goal is considered by neuro-normates to be the resolution of dissonance to produce harmony, an effect that neuro-normative cognitive structures are designed to produce. Consequently, neuro-normates forget that the world is a cacophonous place, and texts written by autists lift the veil of coherence dropped by neurotypical cognitive structures. At the close of his poem, “Frustration,” Craig Romkema asks: “Which of us has the best view?” (18). Is it the neuro-normate taking the Concorde or the autist falling straight down? The airplane provided a luxurious form of travel to the (economically) privileged few, a situation that would be much more comfortable for certain travelers. Yet, the free-fall takes place in the open air, without any barriers to seeing the environment in its entirety. However, Romkema’s question lacks a

clear answer because the criteria for making this judgment are themselves unclear—what would the best view look like?

This question is commonly asked or invoked by the modernists who appear in the next chapter, particularly in their assessment of the *literary* style that will present the best view. In this case, Romkema leaves it to the (neuro-normative) reader to answer this question, though no doubt he assumes she will choose the Concorde. For, what is the reward for braving the danger associated with the cognitive style common among autists? The texts analyzed here suggest it is access to dimensions unavailable to neuro-normates.

¹ This chapter includes material that was previously published in Barber-Stetson, “Slow Processing.”

² This descriptor has since been deleted, but the *DSM-5* still includes “highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus,” which can include this theory and the former descriptor.

³ For Rapaport, introversion and autism are distinct because “autistic strivings may also be directed outward, as for instance in the schizophrenic world-reformer who wants to remold society,” while introverts only look inward (399-400). This distinction does not hold true for definitions of autism in later scientific and psychiatric research, such as the work of Leo Kanner.

⁴ Except through second-hand summaries and his *Textbook of Psychiatry* (1924).

⁵ Frith is skeptical of this “coincidence” (*Autism*, 5).

⁶ German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin’s findings on the onset of schizophrenia support Kanner’s distinction. “Kraepelin, the first psychiatrist to describe the disorder that we now

call schizophrenia, reported that 94 percent of his sample of over 1,000 cases had onset after the age of 15” (Frith, *Autism* 69). Hans Asperger, whose work will be discussed in the next section, proposes a similar distinction between schizophrenia and autism. For him, autism lacks the “progressive deterioration that would be expected for psychosis. In essence, [individual with autism] remain the same throughout their life, though there is often improved adaptation, and many can achieve a reasonable degree of social interaction” (86).

⁷ This inflexible language use has been picked up by the scientific literature about autism and has become an indicator of an un- or underdeveloped sense of self.

⁸ Asperger makes a similar recognition in the case of Ernst K. “Ernst talked incessantly, regardless of the questions he was being asked. Everything he did was accompanied by elaborate explanation....Some of these ‘asides’ were quite remarkable, not only in the sense that they were very adult in diction, but also because they showed good observation” (61).

⁹ All references to the *DSM I-IV* take their language from Grinker.

¹⁰ Koffka supported a different translation, with a different meaning in English: “The whole is *other than* the sum of its parts.”

¹¹ Frith and Happé also revise Frith’s claim from *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* that weak central coherence causes or explains the social difficulties that individuals with autism experience. After the publication of this text, she encountered research that adults without social difficulties and autists with a functioning Theory of Mind both display detail-focused processing (6, 17). While weak central coherence likely does not cause

autistic social deficits, “it seems plausible that detail focus might further interfere with already abnormal social functioning” (17).

¹² See Witkin and Goodenough. Francesca Happé provides a useful summary of the role the EFT has played in autism research in “Embedded Figures Test (EFT).”

¹³ She relies on an earlier study, conducted by Shah and Frith. Such tests have since been replicated in many different forms, as with Shah and Frith’s use of the block design test from the Weschler Intelligence Scale.

¹⁴ Daniel Tammet also cites the Navon Task and Frith’s theory in describing his cognitive style (*Embracing* 173).

¹⁵ Reciprocally, autists are commonly said to perceive the trees before the forest. Articles that use this metaphor are by Caroline E. Robertson et al. and Audrey Perreault et al.

¹⁶ Laurent Mottron and Isabelle Soulières do underscore that “Global level has to be distinguished from holistic level, which is a pattern emerging only from the combination of local and global elements.” The outline of a face (global) is not the same as “the information that it is a face, which emerges only from the integration of parts and whole together” (1445).

¹⁷ See also Belmonte et al. Past studies have proposed that autists’ brains exhibit either underconnectivity or hyperconnectivity, but more recent research has integrated these findings and located specific regions that exhibit these different forms of connectivity. For example, Uddin et al. focus on the “salience network,” a group of brain regions that “integrat[e] external sensory stimuli with internal states” and determine which deserve our attention (E2).

¹⁸ Rinehart et al. similarly conclude that “individuals with autism may have a problem with inhibiting local information and also a problem with shifting attention away from such stimuli” (76). In an additional twist, they found that individuals with Asperger’s did not encounter the same difficulty transitioning from local to global (76). “Essentially, it is being suggested that individuals with autism and Asperger’s disorder share a core visual-perceptual anomaly (i.e. local bias), but that individuals with autism have an additional set-shifting anomaly which leads to greater functional impairment” (77). This finding requires additional support.

¹⁹ See Mottron, Peretz, and M  nard; O’Riordan and Passetti; and Litrownik et al.

²⁰ It is surprising that Mukhopadhyay accedes to this hierarchy, even though he emphasizes in *How Can I Talk?* that he does not see his autism as a disease that needs to be cured (176).

²¹ I will make a connection between this quotation and *The Waste Land* in the next chapter.

²² Many autists do not recognize when they are in situations where they are in danger. For instance, Mukhopadhyay presents a situation where he became overwhelmed at a dinner party and left the host’s house, walking out into the street without even acknowledging that a street was there.

²³ Many autists write about moments when they asked this same question. For instance, Grandin “started asking other people [in meetings and at work] detailed questions about how they accessed information from those memories” (*Thinking* 4). Only from these encounters do Grandin and Mukhopadhyay, among others, recognize the kinds of differences between their cognitive style and a more normative one.

²⁴ The table of contents in *Embracing the Sky* is less relevant to this discussion because it is a collection of poetry. Because these texts are often collections of distinct poems, they do not elicit the same readerly expectations for coherence among the different elements. Within this context, it may be surprising that Romkema's table of contents reveals a connection among many of his poems: the titles for all but four (40) are nouns, and a fourth (10) of them end in -tion.

²⁵ See the similar etymologies of "bore" and "nag."

²⁶ No source is indicated within the interview for the provenance of this word choice (i.e., it could have originated with Mukhopadhyay himself), so I conclude that these are scare quotes. I may contact Savarese to receive clarification.

²⁷ While it is true that Lawson herself may not have made this decision (it could have been introduced by an editor or typesetter at Jessica Kingsley Publishing), this format is not typical of the publishing house; therefore, I am inclined to suggest that it was Lawson's choice.

Chapter 3

Redefining Modernism: The Flattening Power of Fragmentation¹

In her article “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism” (2001), Susan Stanford Friedman recognizes that “Definitions mean to fence in, to fix, and to stabilize. But they often end up being fluid, in a destabilized state of ongoing formation, deformation, and reformation that serves the changing needs of the moment” (497). However, we often do not acknowledge the ongoing adaptations that definitions must undergo, instead accepting their terms as established after hearing them enough times.

One way to imbue modernist literature with a new vitality is to re-examine and push back against established definitions for what modernism is or was. Such language limits the interpretations that we can produce, the connections we can locate between texts and ideas. It limits us to a particular space, one that has been trod and re-trod for almost 100 years. We need not leave such language behind altogether, but confine it for the moment to a state of suspended animation. For instance, literary critics often do not explore the implications of using spatial metaphors like “fragment” to interpret modernist texts. The use of this term in literary criticism of modernist texts is a symptom of a spatially limited reading, one that has been prevalent within modernist studies since at least the 1940s. The seventy years that have passed occasion a critical reflection on the ways in which we have defined modernist aesthetics and the kinds of relationships with the reader that these aesthetics foster. I came to question the use of this term to describe modernist texts after confronting the spatial limitations of Uta Frith’s weak central

coherence, which is why this chapter follows the previous one. Taking my cue from the texts themselves, I pursue an approach motivated by the interest within both disability studies and modernism in drawing attention to that which may have proceeded before unquestioned and unexamined.

Fragments are small, too small at times to be significant, which may explain why the term itself has largely escaped discussion. As a word and object, “fragment” carries within it a previous event—a rupture—upon which its existence depends. A fragment can be something that was never finished—an incomplete manuscript, for example, which became a fragment the moment the author stopped writing it. More often, though, a fragment is what remains after the rest of a larger object is destroyed, like the fragment of a Dead Sea scroll. Typically, they are important only as residue left by larger bodies that no longer exist. Fragments point elsewhere and are thus treated by normates as always already broken and lacking. As with the Dead Sea scrolls, fragments have their primary meaning in their ability to give clues about the whole that no longer exists; it is a means that leads us toward an end—closure. When we refer to objects as fragments, the cause of this event and the whole that preceded the fragment are often left ambiguous. We know only that which we have in front of us, which means we do not have all necessary information.

Yet, as the previous chapter suggested, the logic of parts and wholes can be deceiving as it allows us to ignore the fact that fragments are wholes valuable in themselves. Talking about these texts in terms of fragmentation flattens the movement taking place within the texts and within readers’ brains as they process these texts. It removes topography from the spatial plane, recognizing only horizontal movement rather

both horizontal and vertical movement. In this way, it limits the spatial dimensions in which the texts make connections and thus the interpretations we can form of these texts. This critical treatment directly contradicts the innovations of modernist art, which C.S. Lewis described as “new in a new way, almost in a new dimension” (qtd. in Bradbury and McFarlane 20). It restricts them to two dimensions, and thus authors like Eliot are recognized more for what they show to be broken than for what they have created. Continuity is privileged, but only when it moves in particular directions, and the prevalence of “fragment” as an analytical term suggests that only two dimensions are being appreciated. The previous chapter questioned the restrictive assessment of processing styles that proceed in different directions, characterized spatially as “top-down” or “bottom-up.” Though modernist texts may seem to thwart movement in one direction, they make other options and thus perspectives available; yet, readers must be flexible and willing to let go of their processing habits.

The term emerges as important within modernism largely through the representation of this literary movement as an aesthetic response to historical conditions. European modernism has been characterized as “a paradigmatic shift, a major revolt, beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, against the prevalent literary and aesthetic traditions of the Western world” (Eysteinnsson 2).² Friedman specifically uses the phrase “radical rupture” to describe the relationship typically assumed to exist between modernism and “post-Renaissance Enlightenment humanism” (500-1). As one history of modernism goes, modernist texts respond to historical conditions different from those existing during the Enlightenment. Such conditions were often characterized as “the chaos of the modern world,” which was encapsulated in events like World War I

(Eysteinnsson 8). People no longer felt confident in their own knowledge; their sense of self as a coherent entity had been ruptured, though they later realized (à la Lacan) that it had always been so. This figurative rupture translated to a literary aesthetic of rupture, manifested in the “poetics of fragmentation, parataxis, image, and idiosyncratic rhythms and sound patterns” often associated with modernism (501).

Friedman focuses on parataxis as an essential part of modernism, both in its aesthetics and the conceptual paradoxes contained within the term itself. She defines it as “the juxtaposition of things without providing connectives” (494). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* suggests Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” as an example of the technique (Burt), while Edward Morris provides the simpler: “The sun is shining. Julius Caesar was killed on the Ides of March” (117). By placing together two sentences or ideas that appear unrelated, this technique “disrupt[s] and fragment[s] conventional sequencing, causality, and perspective” (Friedman 494), and because of this, Burt proposes that it “lends itself naturally to the rush and chaos of life as it is lived in the immediate first-person.” He no doubt proposes this connection because parataxis conveys a sense of urgency, as if the author or narrator did not have enough time to develop these connections.

Morris takes his definition of the technique further by suggesting that it “is an indication of mental disorder” (117).

[T]he normal mind, upon hearing two such sentences uttered together,
instinctively gropes about for some situation, fanciful or humorous or grotesque,
which will afford a glimpse of a rational connection between the two; so strong is

the habit of associating mere succession with relation...there is no such independence between successive groups of concepts. (117)

Taking his definition to this extreme points yet again to the very close relationship between modern life and cognitive disorder. When confronted with parataxis, normates will seek connection between the seemingly disparate elements, whereas he suggests that those affected by cognitive disorders will not engage in this search, merely accepting parataxis at face value. Yet, defining parataxis as an act of juxtaposition and its elements as fragments produces just this result, refusing to acknowledge the very real possibility that they may be connected—however obscure this connection may be. Only “conventional sequencing” is fragmented, not sequencing altogether.

Despite our understanding of parataxis, many critics take this surface at face value. For instance, in their entry on modern poetic innovations, Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery suggest that “the lasting power of *The Cantos* derives precisely from the failure to achieve closure and the engagement, instead, with uncertainty through the devices it deploys—the poetics of ellipsis and fragment, the suggestive collisions of the ideogrammatic method, and the speaking through citation and the voices of others” (76). In their assessment, these critics invoke the figure of the fragment to suggest that modernism paradoxically succeeds by failing, failing to achieve the closure provided by conventional literary forms. Such a negative reading is typical of modernist literary criticism, an approach that no doubt owes a debt to Friedrich Nietzsche and the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno. Though they acknowledge the “uncertainty” fostered by modernist texts, they use critical language that forecloses the possibility that closure may be achieved—a possibility that these texts keep alive.

To capture the “uncertainty” that Hampson and Montgomery describe above, modernism often uses both its story and poetic composition to “interrupt the modernity that we live and understand as a social, if not ‘normal,’ way of life” (Eysteinsson 6). Texts like Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) expose the constructed nature of the social world and the anxiety it causes many people. Reading modernist texts as fragmented also aligns with the conventional reading of the modern social subject as isolated from other bodies and lacking the relationships (interpersonal connections) that a body should have. Such interpretations focus on what these bodies do not have or do, the ways in which they differ from normates; therefore, one could argue that such texts present subjects disabled by the environment in which they live. In these texts, the normal stops being normal; familiar environments and people become radically unfamiliar, defying protagonists’ attempts to process them. Correspondingly, the poetics of such texts disables readers so that they may be more receptive to this kind of position.

Treating modernism and/or modernity as a “radical rupture,” in Friedman’s words, or as an interruption, in Eysteinsson’s, requires that they be located in opposition to something other. There is little consensus regarding the “nature of the revolt” (Eysteinsson 2), though the amorphous concept of tradition typically stands in as modernism’s antagonist. Eysteinsson sees this as “the hall mark of modernism, the one feature that seems capable of lending the concept a critical coherence” (52). Such an oppositional framework retroactively positions tradition as a continuous and coherent entity, though this term can adapt to accommodate many different contexts. Literary realism often serves as a more specific adversary, no doubt due in part to the influence of Georg Lukacs’s “The Ideology of Modernism” (1957). Defining modernism through its

opposition to tradition or to literary movements as diverse as realism again positions it as organized around negative principles—what it *is not* rather than what it *is* or *does*.

As concepts, tradition and the normal exist because they “den[y their] own production as a historical formation,” in the same way that Friedman argues that modernity does (504). “[T]he center” of such concepts—like the center of the literary texts under analysis in this chapter—“is scattered, interactive, and multiple” (507). Attempts to consolidate such concepts again reveal the same kinds of issues raised about Frith’s theory of weak central coherence. Coherence requires that certain elements be overlooked. Though “the (self)consciousness of modernity” may appear to “refus[e] the principle of historical continuity and evolution in its insistence on origin, newness, and revolution,” as Friedman suggests, that does not mean the texts themselves are discontinuous or that they are disconnected from history (504). In fact, they develop alternative forms of continuity that ground them historically in a way that suggests their relationship with tradition to be much more complex than a mere rejection or refusal.

This chapter takes a different approach to modernist texts and modernism more generally, a more affirmative one motivated by disability studies’s rejection of interpretations founded on lack. It examines the negative language that has been used to frame modernist texts—such as “fragment,” “rupture,” and “isolation”—in relation to the structure and content of three texts: T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Hugh MacDiarmid’s *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923), and H.D.’s *Palimpsest* (1926). It then applies Deleuze’s proposal that texts in a minor literature be considered “adjacently,” as “always in contact...but also always repelled,” to the different parts of a single text—ones which may not seem at times and to some people to have a definite relation to each

other. In this case, continuities become visible, which operate in direct contrast to but also in conjunction with conventional definitions of modernism. Though many protagonists and narrators are actively seeking coherence, rarely do they achieve it. While these texts do reflect the feeling of confusion and disorientation in their poetics, they also use techniques like allusion to produce paths that readers can follow; their directions do diverge, though, from normative expectations for the readerly movement that a text will produce.

Such dissonance is visible in the definition of “modern” itself. As Friedman recognizes, “modern” as an adjective “signifies both revolution and evolution, both the break from history and its return” (505). The same issue applies to both “modernity” and “modernism,” which are “term[s] at war with [themselves]” (505). To give meaning to these terms, Friedman proposes an approach that aligns with Deleuze’s: she suggests we locate “a meaning produced liminally in between” by pursuing “a dialogic that pits the contradictory processes of formation and deformation against each other, each as necessary to the other” (505). This approach requires that we acknowledge the “centripetal and centrifugal forces in contradiction and constant interplay” (505), and it reflects the commitment to both continuity and contiguity displayed by Deleuze.

Yet, Friedman is not the first to suggest such an approach in relation to modernism; the modernist slogan often attributed to Ezra Pound—“make it new”—contains within it the paradoxical relation of the modern to the traditional. As Michael North points out, the slogan is actually Pound’s English translation of M.G. Pauthier’s French translation of the Chinese philosophical text *Da Xue*. I recognized the same issue with Pound’s translation as North does: Pauthier renders the Chinese as “fais-le de

nouveau,” which is more literally translated as “do it again” (North, *Novelty* 164). The phrase, however, contains the potential for both translations within it, reflecting Jacques Derrida’s concept of *iterability*—repetitions are performances of the same, but with a difference. Understanding this literary history draws attention to the intimate connection between modernism and tradition: the movement is not merely a rejection of the traditional, but a response to it in which the traditional is repeated with a difference.

Harry Levin recognizes the importance of this interplay with his use of an example from Picasso’s life to suggest why modernist artists adopt the style examined in this chapter. As he summarizes, “Picasso was asked by a conventional person who admired his classical illustrations, ‘Since you can draw so beautifully, why do you spend your time making those queer things?’ He answered succinctly, ‘That’s why’ (610). When an aesthetic becomes conventional, it gains social acceptance and therefore value through the connections that an artist fosters with earlier works. Here, Picasso recognizes the importance of developing the ability to produce art conventionally acknowledged as beautiful before one attempts to break these rules. Understanding conventional aesthetics allows him to see how and where he can experiment; it gives him the tools to break the rules in addition to awareness where interventions can take place and will have the most impact. Yet, such training also suggests that work he produces will always be a response to earlier art, connected to it though such connections may at times appear to be absent.

Like Picasso, the writers whose work is analyzed here are knowledgeable about traditional art and have already achieved the conventional by the time they create modernist art. Though they seek something new, their experiments are informed by the “historical sense” that Eliot describes in “Traditional and the Individual Talent” (1920) as

“a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.” Though the new artist “must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past,” the standards of the past are reciprocally judged through the production and reception of his work. In their structure and content, such texts recognize the difficulty (even, impossibility) of creating art that wholly rejects the conventional, given the artist’s acculturation into this system.

In Levin’s example, Picasso does not attempt to counter the description of his work as strange, and the use of the word “queer” here recognizes the threat that Picasso’s work poses to established aesthetic norms. Artists that Levin groups with Picasso, including Stravinsky and Joyce, all evince what he describes as a “metamorphic impetus” (610). This vague phrase refers to their motivation to pursue the development of non-normative forms for presenting art in response to conventionally accepted aesthetics. More specifically, he describes it as a “reshaping spirit which must continually transpose its material and outdistance itself” (610). Levin’s word choice here reveals that a primary characteristic of modernism is visible in the order that writers present information. “Transpose” suggests that they “shift” material “from one place or time to another,” disrupting conventional expectations for how information should be presented both spatially and temporally (*OED*). Such shifts may be visible in irregular syntax—not unfamiliar in poetry—as with dyslexia, where individuals may transpose numbers, letters, or words. Yet, transpositions are only legible as such in relation to particular orders that have become conventional or normal. And it is only in relation to such norms that transpositions may be read as “corrupt[ions]” (*OED*).

As such, Levin recognizes the same “dialogic” as Friedman did earlier between “the contradictory processes of formation and deformation.” In fact, he also characterizes

modernist aesthetics as a “systematic deformation” (610). The negative connotation assigned to “deformation” positions bodies with particular appearances as less beautiful—and, therefore, less valuable—than others. This descriptive term treats bodies assigned this label as always already in relation to those whose forms are aesthetically valued. Though deformations are typically treated as of worse quality, they only appear as such within a particular social and, in this case, literary context. Again, Levin’s assessment implies not just that modernist art lacks order but that it follows a *different* order, one that these artists find valuable in their current circumstances. For, in the words of G. Gregory Smith, who significantly influenced MacDiarmid’s work, “disorderly order is order after all” (5), and only “the breaking of outmoded images gives way to the making of fresh ones,” according to Levin (611).

While the texts analyzed in this chapter may look like a “heap of broken images,” they display ambivalence about critical suggestions that modern life contains only radical disorder. These texts are radically allusive, their authors weaving explicit connections to earlier history or literature into their structure, and this practice complicates suggestions that they exhibit a “radical rupture from the immediate past” (Friedman 504). Often suggested as one of the forefathers of modernism, Gustav Flaubert wrote in a 1852 letter, “What strikes me as beautiful, which I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would hold itself together by itself through the internal force of its style” (qtd. in Bradbury and McFarlane 25). Such a text would appear as a fragment within literary history, an island unto itself; yet, that is not how Eliot, MacDiarmid, and H.D. position their texts. Though they display an obvious debt to French writers of the nineteenth century, such as Charles Baudelaire, this quotation

indicates one way in which the works examined here differ from their innovative predecessors.

Texts like those examined here are more likely than *Madame Bovary* or *Sentimental Education* to feel as if no force holds them together; the forces at work in the text—linguistic, formal, or the experiences they describe—appear to drive energy outward rather than to bind its elements more tightly together. One way in which authors produce this effect is through the use of allusion. Readers respond to allusions differently depending on the way in which authors include them in the text. One approach is to allude to texts or events that constitute common knowledge for a particular community, such as the Bible or the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (Guy Fawkes). These allusions will be obscure to people outside the community, but they produce a different effect than allusions with more obscure referents. The former are more inclusive because the number of people who participate in these communities is larger, while the latter are more exclusive and less accessible. Another way to make allusions visible qua allusions is by explicitly identifying the text's author or title, as Hugh MacDiarmid does in particular parts of *Annals of the Five Senses*. These two strategies quickly alert a majority of readers that this is an allusion, and because of the way in which authors present them, readers will be more likely to move forward without seeking more information about allusions.

Two alternative approaches are to include the allusions without calling them out as allusions or to select allusions whose referents will only be easily locatable for a small community of readers. Modernist texts like *The Waste Land* are better known for making these kinds of allusions, often dealing with charges of plagiarism as MacDiarmid did, because they do not identify the information as written by another and because of the

number of allusions included in their texts. Critics like Levin have characterized this approach as producing a tone of “uncompromising intellectuality” in these texts because of the small communities to which it appeals (628), and some readers find it off-putting because of its exclusiveness. Approaches like these foster paradoxical and contradictory responses in which readers describe texts like *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* as too dense to penetrate yet paradoxically fragmented. The latter metaphor suggests that the texts should be full of holes, places where readers can gain footholds, while the former suggests that none exist.

Such modernist uses of allusion have the potential to alter the way in which a reader moves through a text. Neuro-normative readers are conditioned to move forward, word by word, line by line, through past experience. Yet, introducing allusions in these ways pulls readers in multiple directions at once. Readers may stop to meditate on a word, phrase, or line that reminds them of another text or whose tone sounds different from the rest of the text. This decision halts their forward movement and instead moves them outward on a line of flight that is still part of the text but which moves against the grain of conventional English-language reading practices. These authors send their readers on figurative trips to different time periods, geographical locations, and cultures, which sound not unlike the quest for the Grail that serves as one of *The Waste Land*’s primary allusions. Yet, readers conditioned by these practices are still compelled by habit to move forward in a conventional way. Here, we see the competing centrifugal and centripetal forces that Friedman referenced earlier. Employing allusion in this way asks readers to negotiate among different options and make decisions about which way they want to move.

Approaching allusion in this way contradicts the oft-repeated trope that modernist texts move “towards introversion” in their representation of particular characters’ thought processes (Bradbury and McFarlane 26). Rather, it shows their intimate interconnection with particular environments, though these texts and events to which they connect may not be familiar to the readers. Literature written by autists contradicts the same kind of belief that the characters it depicts withdraw from the external world. Instead, it reveals this diagnosis to be *a form of reading*, a neuro-normative interpretation of autists’ behavior. In modernism, allusion becomes a way of increasing the number of external attachments that a text has. Though this method can be interpreted differently, texts like the three analyzed in this chapter are explicitly connected to the world outside themselves, just as autists are, but their connections are not manifested in a neuro-normative way. Though their allusive practice can be read as excluding readers without the necessary education, it also multiplies the points of entry into these texts.

Neuro-normates privilege particular kinds and ways of forming attachments, yet this chapter recognizes ways in which modernists devote cognitive and textual space to different kinds of attachments or different ways of forming attachments. Such attachments may be purely textual, as with allusions, or they may be interpersonal, as Eliot shows in *The Waste Land*. Particular environments afford particular attachments for people with different backgrounds and abilities. Talking about modernist aesthetics in terms of fragments refuses to acknowledge some of these strategies as legitimate or the directions in which individuals distribute their attention as worthy of recognition. This approach relies on the language of part and whole as a way to rationalize this exclusion and to continue assigning value to neuro-normative forms and ways of producing

coherence. As a spatial metaphor, the fragment restricts the dimension and scale in which readers can think about modernist texts and ignores the many ways texts like *The Waste Land*, *Annals of the Five Senses*, and *Palimpsest* reach outside of themselves.

In so doing, such language ignores the complex interaction of time and space in modernist texts like those analyzed here. Levin recognizes that “[o]ne of the determining characteristics of modern man is his awareness of chronology” (620-21), and time is a well-known interest of many modernists and philosophers, including Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Pound, and Joyce. All of these individuals had experienced the turning of a century, which no doubt caused them to develop a different awareness of temporal and historical boundaries. Chronologies function as organizational schemes, and conventional ones cannot capture the “paradoxical state of feeling belated and up-to-date simultaneously” that Levin attributes to the interwar period (622). To capture this feeling, writers and artists adapt the way in which they present events, rejecting conventional chronologies as a result of Levin’s so-called metamorphic impetus. One response was the Simultaneism for which artists like Robert Delaunay became known, which altered conventional forms to represent “things happening together” (Caws 142). Delaunay contrasts this aesthetic commitment with “the sequential,” for which “the railway train” serves as his primary example. This body moves only forward and backward, and to ensure that its movement proceeds smoothly, the tracks must be perfectly parallel, never intersecting or even deviating from a precise path.

Such reactions against the sequential were not only part of Simultaneism but much of modernism, more generally, as Joseph Frank recognizes in his three-article

series “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (1945). Following the theories of Gotthold Lessing, Frank distinguishes the way in which artists compose literature from forms like paintings. Artists “juxtapose” elements in paintings so that they can be perceived “in an instant of time” while literature is organized as “a succession of words proceeding through time,” or a “narrative sequence” (223). Frank judges these organizational methods as based on qualities inherent in the media that the artists choose (picture vs. language) and also “the conditions of human perception” (224). In its conventional form, a painting is assumed by Lessing to take a moment to process whereas a piece of literature takes more time as the reader must work his way through the sequence of symbols.

Modernist artists do not respect these conditions, according to Frank, as they refuse Lessing’s distinction between a “time-logic” and “space-logic” (229). Space-logic relates back to the way in which symbols are arranged within a text, and time-logic captures the way in which the observer or reader processes these symbols. Unlike other literature, modernist texts “undermine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader’s normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time” (227). In other words, they treat literature like paintings, spatially, which provides one explanation why the two media are often discussed together in histories of the period. Based on this revised approach, the elements of which modernist texts are composed are only meaningful when perceived simultaneously for Frank; “when read consecutively in time, [they] have no comprehensible relation to each other” (229). By eschewing this conventional organizational form, modernist literature instigates the use of a different

reading style or way of processing information, one to which the reader may not be accustomed.

While I follow Frank in all of this, his proposal that modern prose and poetry are “reflexive” overlooks the intimate connection that these texts and characters have with their environments. Frank means this in the sense that “the primary reference of any word group is to something inside the poem itself” (229). According to this characterization, modernist artists turn their readers inward, away from the world outside the text, assumedly so that it can be perceived “spatially, in a moment of time” (225). This is the “proper” way to understand modernist texts, as objects whose meaning can only be assessed in relation to themselves (232). Yet, Frank seems to be overstating his case.

These texts cannot and do not ever escape the sequential, nor do Eliot, MacDiarmid, or H.D. appear to want to, because of the way in which Anglophone neuro-normates read written texts: from left to right, top to bottom, front to back. None of these authors alter the form of their texts significantly enough to make this approach impossible. They do recognize moments when sequences like normative cognitive processing are *on the verge of* breakdown. Characters like Raymonde Ransome or the protagonist of “A Four Year’s Harvest” are confronted by a plethora of possibilities, stimuli that can be overwhelming in their number and kind. Neither readers nor protagonists are conditioned to form sense from these stimuli. Consequently, they create the opportunity for readers themselves to adapt to new environments.

For their authors, Levin proposes that his “metamorphic impetus” provides a means of “contro[lling] the accumulating details,” particularly in the case of Joyce (623). Levin sees Joyce responding to a literary movement (Naturalism) in which “the

environment came dangerously close to swamping the personages” (624). The question is, though, *who is saved* by the re/deformation in which authors like Joyce engage: the characters, authors, or the audience? In the texts analyzed here, no person appears saved; they are all moving toward the state of Eliot’s Phlebas, close to drowning. The texts leave us wondering about their fate. None go under—at least, in the course of the narrative. This existence at the brink of overload without a complete descent into chaos mirrors the aesthetic of the texts themselves. Such precarity imbues the texts with a tension that influences the reader’s encounter with them. Their form, which does not wholly reject the sequential, makes a solution appear both imperative and still possible.

The allusive density of texts like *The Waste Land*, *Annals of the Five Senses*, and others calls the reader to move both outward and inward and then forward together. Authors like MacDiarmid heighten the centrifugal properties of their texts using techniques like allusion or linguistic experimentation, as with his Synthetic Scots. As Matthew Hart argues, the “unintelligibility” of the texts that MacDiarmid produced “is not a necessary quality of Scots poetry” (56). The poems of Robert Burns use Lallans while still remaining accessible to an English-speaking audience. For Hart, MacDiarmid’s “radicalization of literary Scots works to undercut the vernacular’s usually centripetal force, making strange a language that had calcified into a sickly residue of the domestic and the familiar” (57). Synthetic Scots enstranges readers (à la Viktor Shklovsky) from their own language using MacDiarmid’s self-professed “delight in words; and the obsolete; the distinctively local, the idiomatic, the unused” (qtd. in Bold 137). Similarly, the seemingly fragmented form of modernist texts enstranges readers

from genres like the novel and the long poem with which they have become overly comfortable.

In their rejection of conventional linguistic sequences, modernist artists follow their protagonists in indirectly embracing Lessing's suggestion that "[n]o matter how accurate and vivid a verbal description might be...it could not give the unified impression of a visible object; no matter how skillfully figures might be chosen and arranged, a painting or piece of sculpture could not successfully set forth the various stages of an action" (223-4). Rather than treating their experiments as compensation for linguistic or literary defects, it makes more sense to recognize their acceptance of *imbalance*, of how difficult albeit impossible it may be to achieve such a balance. Accepting the inadequacy of conventional forms and approaches allowed them and can allow readers to adopt a more proactive (as opposed to reactive) position.

Copula(e)tion in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land (1922) is widely considered one of the most canonical texts of literary modernism, though Levin recognizes that texts this one "startled and puzzled his early readers" (611). On a basic structural level, it confronts readers with five numbered and titled sections of differing lengths and styles. The speakers change with little warning, exposing the reader to multiple narrators without clearly distinguishing between them. From the experiences with other texts, for example, readers may expect the narrators to have names, but any information about the narrators they only learn indirectly through overheard conversations or philosophical musings. Neither the

narrators nor Eliot go out of their way to provide the context that would make this information easier for the reader to process.

Scores of literary critics have either recognized or more boldly attacked the poem and its author for its apparent fragmentation, for exceeding the conventional boundaries imposed by genre by deliberately juxtaposing different elements like meters, rhythms, registers, and literary forms without reconciling them. For example, poet laureate Donald Hall has called the poem “structureless,” and Conrad Aiken has written of Eliot’s layout, “If it is a plan, then its principle is oddly akin to planlessness” (150). This language is oddly similar to that used by autism researchers like Uta Frith as they assess the cognitive processing styles common among autists. Yet, as the previous chapter demonstrates, though conceptual coherence may not at first be apparent, it can still exist.

With such assessments, these critics focus exclusively on the text’s horizontal appearance, which John Crowe Ransom calls its “surface.” According to him, “[t]he most notable surface fact about ‘The Waste Land’ is its extreme disconnection” (167). Reading these interpretations in relation to Ransom’s assessment suggests that they constitute the negative version of “surface readings” proposed in chapter one. These critics recognize only the elements of the poem that appear to be more weakly connected when compared to other literary examples. They neglect to acknowledge, though, that other continuities exist, stretching us beyond the text. Ransom continues:

I do not know just how many parts the poem is supposed to have, but to me there are something like fifty parts which offer no bridges the one to the other and which are quite distinct in time, place, action, persons, tone, and nearly all the unities to which art is accustomed. This discreteness reaches also to the inside of

the parts, where it is indicated by a frequent want of grammatical joints and marks of punctuation...I presume that poetry has rarely gone further in this direction.

(167)

Ransom locates *The Waste Land* in the literary avant-garde because of the visibility of its “parts” and the absence of “unities,” which it can be assumed refer to the three unities laid out in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The poem appears to disrupt all three (action, time, and place), but it is difficult to be sure where exactly these disruptions take place, or by how much the unities are disrupted.

Such ambiguity is one factor that unsettles readers of *The Waste Land*—in this instance, the ambiguous relation between the poem’s elements. Etymologically, “ambiguity” captures the feeling of “uncertainty” when a word, object, or concept can be “understood in two or more ways” (*OED*). The text can send the reader in multiple directions, which requires the reader to actively make decisions based on the situation at hand. Developing such adaptability can be difficult, even cognitively daunting, for many readers. Discomfort with ambiguity and the attendant desire to resolve it is not just a neuro-normative or autistic but a *human* trait. As the previous chapter shows, most autists need more time than most neuro-normates to resolve ambiguity within their environments. The style that Eliot uses in *The Waste Land* places all of his readers in a similar situation; his choices compel readers to remain in what is likely to be an uncomfortable and unfamiliar position, where certainty is difficult to find. Texts like this one enable neuro-normates to learn to accept and cope with such ambiguity as a part of their environments with which they may not be as familiar as many autists.

Learning to deal with ambiguity is connected to the poem's interest in divination, both as a search for (and hopeful location of) water and the future. As Jessie Weston recognizes, tarot cards—which are referenced in the poem (Eliot, *TWL* line 46)—initially were used “not to foretell the Future in general, but to predict the rise and fall of the waters which brought fertility to the land.”³ Therefore, the future is intimately related to the presence (or absence) of water in the poem, though drought typically predicts a negative future for communities based on agriculture. Like Gawain, the reader of these texts is implicitly asked to continue the Quest despite the fact that he lacks necessary information: “whither he rides, and why, he does not know, only that the business is important and pressing” (Weston). In several versions of the tale (though not the ones Weston locates as most dominant), the land remains unfertile and the kingdom goes to war because Gawain and Percival have not asked important questions about either the Quest or the Fisher King's health.⁴ Therefore, the reader's active participation is a necessary component of reading texts like *The Waste Land*.

To see the poem as a whole and not a series of broken parts requires distance, which may be difficult to gain in an encounter with the text. Another critic, Hugh Kenner, suggests that “the first quality of *The Waste Land* to catch a newcomer's attention, its *self-sufficient* juxtaposition without copulae of themes and passages in a *dense mosaic*, had at first a novelty which troubled even the author” (148; emphasis added). Though concerned about its reception, Eliot still published the text. Two parts of Kenner's assessment stand out here. First, his characterization of the poem as “self-sufficient” is contradicted by its commitment to allusion as a literary technique. Allusions are an important part of the poem and difficult to overlook because of the many different kinds

that Eliot includes. He selects them from multiple languages, including English, French, German, Sanskrit, Latin, and Italian, which appear in their original language (except the Sanskrit, which Eliot renders in Roman script). Eliot's allusions are similarly diverse in terms of the genres from which he takes them, including prose, poetry, and drama. They range from more traditional—such as the Bible, Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1320), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and multiple Shakespeare plays—to less, with the latter including the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), and Paul Verlaine's "Parsifal" (1888). Eliot not only alludes to literature but also to popular songs like "That Shakespearian Rag" and "London Bridge," along with familiar mythical figures like Tereus, Philomela, Tiresias, and Apollo.

Because of their number, kind, and the brevity with which they are introduced, these allusions disrupt a normative sense of narrative continuity, which moves horizontally forward through each line from the beginning to the end. Instead, they make other lines of flight available to the reader. The poem is, in fact, a dense framework of connections that extend beyond the text itself. To raise neuro-normates' awareness of the different directions they can travel, Eliot must disrupt the typical path they would follow to process this information, and the way that he employs allusion allows him to do so. He connects the reader vertically or obliquely to historical moments and literary traditions that may not otherwise have entered the conversation. This approach is similar to that taken by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), but to a lesser degree. Because of this approach, readers must be able to quickly transition between different contexts to continue reading normatively, with forward progress.

Despite their importance to the text, these allusions are typically only a few words or a line long, which further impedes the reader's ability to transition smoothly. Eliot closes the first section with an allusion to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), which produces this effect:

“Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,

“Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!” (lines 74-76)

From here, Eliot moves into a woman's dressing room, which leaves the reader wondering why he must keep the Dog away—and what “the Dog” represents. If he recognizes the allusion from these six words, he is likely to pause to remember Baudelaire's text consider its relevance here. If not, then he will still pause to think about why Eliot transitions to French and what these words might mean. Eliot provides little in the way of explanation.

Despite the general dearth of context, Eliot could be said to display some concern for the reader in the “Notes” with which the poem ends. However, criticism of the poem and Eliot's own reflections underscore their ambiguous relation to the text. The footnotes were not included when *The Waste Land* was first published in *The Criterion* (October 16, 1922) and *The Dial* (according to Lawrence Rainey, in the November 1922 issue that was released on Oct. 20). They initially appeared with the version published by Boni & Liveright in December of 1922. In assessing their relation to the text, Michael North argues that “[s]ome of these notes...are so blandly pointless as to suggest a hoax, and others....seem determined to establish mysteries rather than to dispel them.”⁵ In any case, the notes themselves need as much annotation as the poem they pretend to explain”

(“Preface,” ix). Eliot himself remained ambivalent about their value, writing in “The Frontiers of Criticism,” “the poem was inconveniently short, so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter,” which later “stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources” (113).

This explanation minimizes the relevance of the notes in interpreting the poem’s allusions, making room for the reader’s own contributions. Yet, it also contradicts approaches to the poem like that proposed by Kenner. For him, the allusions are “relics” (178), like the Grail, and the reader, or “quester,” is “presented with a terminal heap of fragments which it is his business to enquire about” (172). Based on the content of his notes, Eliot seems to be reacting against such approaches, which focus too much on the content of the allusions—moving only away from the text and not back into it or forward through it. Eliot’s explanation prompts an important question: what is the *right* kind of interest for a reader to display in this context?

In the earlier quotation, Kenner uses an aesthetic metaphor—the mosaic—that can help to elucidate the kind of interest that Eliot may have preferred. MacDiarmid uses the same metaphor in reference to *Annals of the Five Senses* (3), which makes it particularly relevant for discussion in this chapter. When viewed from sufficient distance, the many small tiles of which a mosaic is composed lose their distinctness and merge to form a unified image or design. Their coherence is a perceptual illusion, and it is similar to that which allows neuro-normates to see their environment not as millions of energy particles in constant movement, but instead as a coherent and stable image. The same applies to the perception of a literary text—made up of letters—as a coherent whole, which we call a poem or book. Critics like Kenner who recognize the poem for its fragmentation imply

either 1) that no complete poem exists (i.e., it lacks a “plan” or “structure,” as suggested earlier) or 2) that readers cannot gain enough distance from the text to see the whole that it forms. Though the latter seems more probable, Kenner’s use of this metaphor contradicts his reading of *The Waste Land* as “self-sufficient.” If the text is a mosaic, then the connections between the elements of which it is composed are not inherent in the piece of art, but instead imposed by a viewer with sufficient distance.

If we pursue Kenner’s earlier alignment of the reader with the quester, the object of the quest because that which merits further analysis. Following Weston’s analysis of particular knights who occupied this position—such as Gawain and Perceval—(s)he is expected to restore both the health of the land and the king, whose futures are intertwined. The object of his quest is not personal gain but “definite benefits to be won for others” (Weston). These qualities—in addition to his use of an herb for healing in some versions—liken the quester to a doctor or medicine man. Though Weston acknowledges that no doctor explicitly exists in the Grail legends, she emphasizes the “the curious and persistent attribution of healing skill to so apparently unsuitable a personage as Sir Gawain.” These skills and knowledge likely harken back to the myth’s origins in ancient fertility rituals, yet they are an important aspect of the relationship between the quester and the king that is not often discussed in relation to *The Waste Land* and one that merits consideration within the context of this dissertation. Within the environment that the poem depicts, there may be benefits other than restoration, as this goal simply may not be possible. Thus, the poem also provides a critique of contemporary medicine and the treatment of disabled individuals.

Within the legends themselves, the Fisher King's embodied situation is characterized only vaguely as a "loss of virility" (Weston). Though it has visible effects—such as the kingdom's deterioration—the King's situation could be attributable to either an illness/wound or a longer-term disability, perhaps associated with advanced age. Though it seems like a temporary situation, descriptions from Weston and others fluctuate in their usage of language affiliated with illness and disability. For instance, Weston repeatedly describes the king's situation as a "disability under which he is suffering," despite the repeated suggestion that the quester has the power to cure him. Greek myth presents a similar relationship between the king and his lands that vacillates between disability and illness: "The king who is without blemish has a flourishing kingdom, the king who is maimed has a kingdom diseased like himself, thus the Spartans were warned by an oracle to beware of a 'lame reign'" (Weston). While "lame" and "maimed" are both associated with disability, "illness" is not. Unlike illnesses or wounds, disabilities cannot be cured; they are embodied positions that are treated as disadvantages within particular social, cultural, and geographical contexts. Though this fluctuation may merely reflect past conflation of disability and illness, treating the king's situation as a disability allows the reader/quester to leave behind restoration as the ultimate goal.

Evidence for approaching the Fisher King as disabled in *The Waste Land* includes a description by a narrator in the third section, who specifically characterizes his brother the Fisher King as a "wreck" (Eliot, *TWL* line 191). This word choice illustrates an important connection between embodiment and the form of the poem. In keeping with the poem's nautical and water themes, "wreck" can refer either to "goods cast ashore from a shipwreck" or to the remains of the ship itself, "a vessel broken, ruined, or totally

disabled by being driven on rocks, cast ashore, or stranded” (*OED*). The *OED* definition explicitly recognizes this word’s connection to disability because a wreck is “helpless,” unable to move in its current environment without assistance from others (*OED*). Both are “remains” that have been “ruined” by conditions of their environments (*Online Etymology Dictionary*); they are leftovers, often treated as useless trash. Unfortunately, disabled individuals often find themselves in such situations today, treated as wrecks beyond salvage.

This passage connects to the poem’s end, where the narrator considers his own death or a radical transformation akin to it. He aligns himself with other “wrecks,” structures in danger of imminent collapse: the London Bridge and *la tour abolie*. He considers how much he should do prepare for it but also what he has already done; specifically, he tells us, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (Eliot, *TWL* line 430). Typically, one would use a strong body to “shore up” another, as a timber would the side of a ship; however, the narrator characterizes his support as ununified “fragments.” This word choice calls into question from the beginning the quality of the support they provide. Though he could be attempting to prevent himself from becoming a wreck like his brother, the plural of “ruin” suggests that he already is one. He figures his body here as a broken, decaying entity that is slowly losing its integrity, and recognizes that his attempts to preserve its integrity are likely futile.

If we consider all people as ships floating on water, then they will all become wrecks or ruins in an environment without water, such as the one *The Waste Land* depicts. The Fisher King’s title connects back to the theme repeated throughout the poem, “that all life comes from the water” (Weston); however, the poem reminds us that water

also brings death, either when there is too much (Phlebas) or too little (drought) of it. What is necessary is some kind of balance. The narrator of the first section continues to hope that the planted corpses “will...bloom this year” (line 72), that the land will rejuvenate; however, there seems to be no question that we can fix these bodies, make them beautiful again, as “bloom” suggests. The Fisher King is the “guardian of the Grail,” according to Weston; thus, he is affiliated with great knowledge, as was the Salmon of Wisdom in Irish and Welsh myth. If we approach the king’s situation as a disability, then the Grail may represent something other than cure for the King and his land. It may be knowledge about how to live in this environment and adapt to its conditions.

Such knowledge may also help us to read the poem, whose form has been related to the historical conditions of the time by both Kenner and Edmund Wilson, among many others. For instance, Kenner suggests that the poem’s aesthetic is related conceptually to the “fragmented present” (Kenner 159). Wilson more explicitly relates the poem’s supposed “lack of structural unity” (“The Poetry,” 144) to the conditions of twentieth-century life: “In our post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals, life no longer seems serious or coherent—we have no belief in the things we do and consequently we have no heart for them” (Wilson, *Axel* 86). *The Waste Land* supposedly reflects this incoherence, and the disillusionment Wilson outlines is manifested in Eliot’s decision not to adhere to a single literary form or literary tradition.

While they are right to acknowledge the poem’s connection to historical conditions, the way in which they make this connection would benefit from a reassessment. In “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), he suggests that “poets in our

civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (126; italics in original). In this passage, Eliot recognizes the processing power that neuro-normates have developed to succeed in modern environments, adapting to deal with ever-greater demands. They are widening their lens to incorporate all manner of stimuli, a movement tied to Eliot’s proposal in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923) that the current age has “lost all form” (130). The clear delineations between objects and situations have fallen away so that they are more difficult to confine within conventional boundaries (i.e., genre). As a result, Eliot argues that “something stricter” than the novel is necessary (130), and he explores how he can disable language as it existed during the moment in which he was writing.

The Waste Land accommodates these seemingly contradictory aesthetic strategies. As many readers would argue, it is more difficult to process because it moves in multiple directions at once. One way to interpret Eliot’s call for strictness is as a move toward a narrower perspective, and *The Waste Land* presents a series of perspectives that appear narrow when viewed from one dimension yet expand into others. Their scope is limited in that readers do not have much of the information that they might expect when reading a poetic narrative. Yet, the poem is more comprehensive in terms of the allusions that it makes. Despite the negative neuro-normative connotation ascribed to narrowness, *The Waste Land* reveals the benefits of limiting conventional information, but also the difficulty that it poses to neuro-normative processing styles. *The Waste Land* may not

look unified according to conventional standards, but it presents a plurality of unities instead. Eliot uses strategies like allusion to interrupt the conventional ways in which narratives unfold, sending readers outward though they may still strive to move forward. This method calls into question the perceptual coherence that those relying on a neuro-normative cognitive style likely assume exists as an inherent property of their environments.

Readers may feel more impelled to pursue connections that take them outward rather than forward because *The Waste Land* slows the time that it takes neuro-normates to transition between different stimuli (which, in the case of the poem, can be words, lines, or sections). As a result, it creates space for a stage of perception of which neuro-normates are typically not conscious. From this perspective, Ransom is right to suggest that Eliot “assails the philosophical or cosmical principles under which we form the usual images of reality” (Ransom 168). In this space, sensations that may in other contexts appear innocuous easily become overwhelming because the reader is unable to introduce the distance necessary to see the image on the mosaic. This stage can be uncomfortable for neuro-normates used to moving forward without impediment. By removing the textual elements or information that facilitates such movement in other texts, Eliot—like the other authors in this chapter—prevents readers from moving too quickly past this stage. Thus, they experience perceptual situations more familiar to autists, based on the texts discussed in the previous chapter. One of the poem’s profound innovations lies in its attempt to counteract readers’ cognitive predispositions, which influence their perceptual habits.

This situation contributes to fear that *The Waste Land* can induce, which also comes from the interpretive action required of both the narrators and the readers. These individuals are accustomed to following a path already laid by their cognitive structures, but in this text, they must sort a pile of confusing sensations to find the metaphorical needle in the haystack for which Romkema was searching earlier. Turning again to “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot contrasts typical readers whose “experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary” with that of a poet, whose “mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience” (125). Interpreting a text calls readers to think like poets, to see the image in the mosaic even when it is difficult to gain the necessary distance. This task becomes more difficult when confronting texts like *The Waste Land*, which maximizes the amount of effort required from readers.

Other authors consider it the task of the poet to organize these parts, minimizing the amount of effort required for comprehension. Yet, *The Waste Land* urges readers to move in directions that are likely to counter their cognitive predispositions. They will feel pulled to move both forward and outward at the same time. This formal strategy can create what biographer Lyndall Gordon has called “a psychological hell in which someone is quite alone” because of the effort required for many people to engage in this process (72). Such cognitive tension may even create the appearance that a reader is disinterested in the surrounding environment because of the intensity required.

The Waste Land openly recognizes the fear that these conditions can induce in stanza two, where the narrator says to “the son of man,”

Only

There is shadow under this red rock,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (lines 24-30)

Because Eliot uses such a general descriptor for the narrator's interlocutor, this section presents an opportunity for the reader to become aware of the effect time has on her body. A shadow is a rough representation of a body hit by light, and its shape changes depending on the time of day and the body's position in relation to the light source (here, the sun). The fear that the narrator offers here is connected to the movement of shadows, which chart time passing throughout the day. Shadows more generally connote death, and the dust no doubt symbolizes the addressee's mortality. To survive under the harsh sun, the reader must learn when and where to take shelter.

The knowledge that the narrator offers may help to prepare the reader for the future. "Fear" has an etymological connection that is relevant in this context. Its relation to "ambush" suggests that one may fear more that which one does not see coming or which catches one by surprise (*OED*). This knowledge may provide the same kind of protection against future events as the "red rock," whose protection the narrator invites the reader to share. One typically becomes fearful in response to danger, but more literally, one could question what there is to be afraid of in "a handful of dust"? Thus, fear has the potential to both disable and empower.

As in MacDiarmid's "Café Scene"—discussed in the next section—many characters presented in *The Waste Land* are confronted by intense sensations that have

the power to injure them. For example, the “son of man” must listen to the overwhelming sound of the cricket, which—like the sun—“gives...no relief,” because he lacks “shelter” (lines 20, 23). The first narrator in the second section and his wife are also vulnerable to sensory flooding because of their “bad” “nerves” and “lidless eyes,” shelter that their bodies cannot provide (lines 111, 138). Their brains fill with sensations—“noise” and popular songs, respectively (line 117)—which spill out onto the page. Such sensory overload leads to cognitive inundation, and characters throughout *The Waste Land* are flooded with stimuli as were the lungs of Phlebas, the “drowned Phoenician Sailor” (lines 312, 47). Like many autists, these characters find it difficult to breathe among “strange synthetic perfumes / [that...] troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours” (lines 87-89). Because of this information overload, these characters are like the tree introduced in the first section of the poem whose roots cannot establish a firm and nourishing foundation in this world’s “stony rubbish” (line 20). They must found themselves in ground that seems inhospitable to life, as does this reality whose sensations constantly overwhelm the body’s defenses and whose elements may feel disconnected. To exist, much less “grow” (line 19), the tree must adapt to its circumstances.

Such non-normative relations are also visible in the interpersonal connections depicted in this poem. Eliot repeatedly portrays individuals in close physical proximity who encounter impasses in communication, from the Hyacinth girl’s companion, who “could not / Speak” to her (line 38), to the Londoners that walk past each other without interacting. A similar missed connection appears most obviously in the interactions between the husband and wife presented in “A Game of Chess.” Because her “nerves are bad,” she asks him, “Stay with me. / Speak to me,” perhaps to help make sense of the

sensations that she experiences (lines 111-112). She assumes that physical proximity will facilitate communication and thus intimacy, but it doesn't; his silence frustrates her, even as she commands him to "Speak" (line 112). Such interactions read as failures of communication that lead some to wonder, as the narrator's wife does, "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?" (line 126). These silenced characters have an obvious connection to *Philomela*, a painting of whom sits over the mantle in their home. Though their tongues have not literally been cut out, their apparent inability to speak (which can also be read, as with autists, as a lack of interest in communication) weakens the connection between them.⁶

In such cases, these characters may remain silent because they have so many sensations to process that it limits their perceptual fields. Since the Enlightenment, vision has held primacy over other senses as a means of perceiving and comprehending one's environment. Not surprisingly, it plays an important sensory role in *The Waste Land*. For example, among the Londoners walking the street in "The Burial of the Dead," only "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet" (lines 64-65). They either do not or cannot engage visually with each other via eye contact, an act that signals to neuro-normates that a person is available for communication. Therefore, no conversation takes place, even if the narrator encounters someone he knows. Similarly, Eliot connects the silence of the Hyacinth girl's companion to the fact that his "eyes failed" (line 39). Though it is not explicit, the narrator's response suggests that he was overwhelmed by what he saw, a state similar to that produced by the "lidless eyes" of the husband and wife playing chess (line 138). Seeing too much—either stimuli too emotionally charged or too numerous to process—

impedes the production of knowledge and its subsequent communication. Thus, the wife accuses her husband of the same failing that the Hyacinth girl's companion admits: because his eyes failed, he "knew nothing" (line 40).

The desire for such clear sight provide one explanation as to why Eliot suggests that Tiresias, a blind prophet from Greek mythology,⁷ is integral for understanding the poem's composition. In a note that has drawn much critical attention, Eliot writes,

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (23n218)

If we take Eliot at his word,⁸ the figure that joins the various parts of the poem is one that mixes two forms of being, man and woman. Such a doubled center presents another way in which this text defies conventional modes of unification,⁹ and it evokes Susan Stanford Friedman's earlier description of "the center" of modernity: "scattered, interactive, and multiple" (507). The one person in the poem who should be able to see clearly "throbs between two lives" that are tied to particular bodies, existing in a state of constant adaptation as they try to reconcile the diverse perspectives available to them (Eliot, *TWL* 23n218). This example provides support for Ransom's argument that Eliot has written the poem "as if it were the function of art to break down the usual singleness of the artistic image, and then to attack the integrity of the individual fragments" (167). Eliot

destabilizes the poem's center just as he does the unity of his characters' perceptions and the characters themselves.

These altered connections also manifest themselves in the acts of copulation that the poem depicts. I follow Hugh Kenner's rhetorical lead, using the word "copulation" to include different kinds of connections under the same term. Though copulation's sexual connotation takes precedence today, it more generally reflects the joining of two bodies—whether they are words, ideas, or something other. From Weston, we know that the Fisher King experiences a "loss of virility," but *The Waste Land* is suffused with sex. Yet, acts of sexual copulation are as non-normative—or, perhaps, unromantic—as the logical and stylistic copulae. For instance, the narrator cannot understand Lil's recoil from the idea of sex with her husband, asking her incredulously, "What you get married for if you don't want children?" (164).¹⁰ These two bodies (Lil's and her husband's) appear to have little connection to each other beyond their shared history and physical proximity. Even though Lil's husband still "wants a good time," he "can't bear to look at [her]" (lines 146, 148). Such examples indicate that neither interpersonal interest nor emotion is a necessary ingredient to pursue and achieve this act. Physical proximity is often assumed to bring intimacy—not just with people, but also with the words and ideas that constitute a poem—and Eliot displays throughout *The Waste Land* that this is not necessarily the case.

The interaction between "the young man carbuncular" and the typist provides another example of such an interaction (line 231). His attentions are "unreproved, if undesired" (line 238); the typist says neither yes nor no, simply allowing events to unfold as they will. Rather than being turned off by her "indifference," the young man "makes a

welcome of [it]" (line 242). Afterwards, she is "[h]ardly aware of her departed lover," not showing that the encounter has affected her in any significant way, other than being "glad it's over" (lines 250, 252). Such disinterest appears again from the perspective of the husband engaging with his wife in "A Game of Chess," discussed earlier. The reader may not be able to understand why the typist engages with the clerk or why the narrator does not or cannot respond as his wife wants. This goes to show again that the motivation for particular connections, what they yield for each party, is more often than not illegible without sustained consideration and interaction.

One force that often serves to connect bodies that are not otherwise is water, a constant presence (often by virtue of its absence) in *The Waste Land*. Water flows over and around bodies, not unlike light; different from light, it has the power to move them, sometimes against their will, in the same direction. Earlier I drew attention to the lack of water in "The Burial of the Dead," and the fifth section, "What the Thunder Said," presents a rocky environment similarly affected by drought, if not a reference to the earlier description. In this world without water, even life-giving symbols like the "Ganga" are "sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain" (lines 395-396). We are left with "stony rubbish" (line 20), "a heap of broken images" (line 22), "a handful of dust" (line 30)—particles related only by their proximity. In such barren situations, water is replaced by "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" and the "crowd [that] flowed over London Bridge" (lines 56, 62). Yet, from a distance, these people "flow" as water would (lines 62, 66), forming what looks like a coherent mass. The same applies to the previous examples and to *The Waste Land* as a whole. These are different kinds of wholes, ones without the elements that are often assumed to make them fertile (e.g.,

water, sexual interest). The question remains, however, are they still valuable? What kinds of connections might be possible between them that could facilitate new ways of thinking and being?

“Polychromatic Chaos” in Hugh MacDiarmid’s *Annals of the Five Senses*

Scottish writer Hugh MacDiarmid is best known for his long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), which was written in the Synthetic Scots that he developed in this and a series of other works. This work and others where MacDiarmid uses his Synthetic languages are known from their borderline unintelligibility to readers unaccustomed to these languages.¹¹ However, MacDiarmid began exploring many of the concepts and literary techniques that emerge in this text in the earlier *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923). MacDiarmid himself wrote that *Annals* contained “the main ideas of all [his] subsequent work” (qtd. in Watson, “Introduction” xv). MacDiarmid drafted the majority of this unusual text from 1916-18 when he was serving in Salonika with the British Army and then in France recuperating from “cerebral neuritis” (qtd. in xi). It was not published until 1923, though, after a failed attempt in 1920.¹² This history makes the text contemporaneous with—though slightly earlier than—Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.

Annals contains six of what MacDiarmid calls “psychological studies, essays, mosaics” with six poems interspersed between them (3). This chapter specifically focuses on the studies because they present a single individual’s cognitive processing, and of these, the first three studies attend most explicitly to the way a protagonist responds to his environment. They are also denser and more complex than the poems. The protagonist of each study often overlaps with the narrating persona, though it is never clear whether or

not they are the same person. Watson sees the six studies connected by a single narrator who greatly resembles MacDiarmid (Introduction xviii); however, a definite relation is impossible to pin down.¹³

These studies also displays the same kind of aesthetic tension discussed in the previous section. Though MacDiarmid describes each study as a mosaic, the text as a whole appears not unlike a mosaic itself. It is a work of art composed of many pieces, and as with *The Waste Land*, the reader must negotiate her distance from it to optimize comprehension. Each study—specifically, the first three—presents a protagonist engaging in this process for him or herself, with various levels of success. Yet, one question follows the reader through the text: if this is a mosaic, what kind of image emerges from the studies and poems that it contains? Only the binding of the book and the numbers that begin each section serve as the obvious mortar that connects these textual pieces.

The studies seem to be divided into two groups of three: 1) “Cerebral,” “Café Scene,” and “A Four Year’s Harvest” and 2) “Sartoria,” “The Never-Yet-Explored,” and “A Limelight from a Solitary Wing.”¹⁴ Alan Bold has proposed that these first three studies may have been part of the fictional autobiography that MacDiarmid planned to write (147). Both “A Limelight from a Solitary Wing” and “A Four Year’s Harvest” explicitly treat events that MacDiarmid experienced, yet the former is less reflective of “the bewildering hopelessness of trying to sort out his impressions and come to any considered conclusion” than the earlier studies (*Annals* 31). Instead, it is the most overtly political, presenting the narrator’s desire for social and political “communion” among citizens (89). Its events took place first (1910), yet it is positioned at the end of the text,

suggesting that studies in *Annals* are either organized according to a reverse chronology or that they do not follow a linear chronology at all.

“Sartoria” and “The Never-Yet-Explored” exist in a complex and more ambiguous relation to the other studies. In these, MacDiarmid leaves the narrator’s gender and identity more fluid, whereas the narrator is labeled as a male in the first three and final studies. “Sartoria” is a first-person eulogy of sorts to a man named Pluskow, “an eccentric aesthete obsessed with female attire” (Bold 148). “The Never-Yet-Explored” has a much more disembodied and omniscient third-person narrator, yet the narrators of both studies appear to be female. The narrator of the latter—Mrs. Morgan—is explicitly designated as such, while the narrator of “Sartoria” only reveals herself as such by recounting her memory of a particular “frock of white silk jersey cloth made with a little bodies and tiny short sleeves” that she associates with a particular winter in her memory (65). Thus, *The Waste Land* and *Annals* each include narrators of both genders, among whom they transition.

The style of “The Never-Yet-Explored” also contrasts with that of “Sartoria,” as the style of “Limelight” diverged from the other autobiographical studies. MacDiarmid presents the content in the former more as a chronicle of events in the typical subject-verb-object manner, as in: “She frankly admitted that she could put into words no conceivable objection to their union. She knew of no bar or impediment. On the contrary, she was perfectly satisfied that Jessie was in all likelihood a more suitable mate than any other Frank was likely to choose or have chosen for him” (75). This calmer, more conventional style differs from the more reflective, less grammatically correct sentences of “Sartoria,” or the areas in which the narrator presents remembered dialogue. Despite

the more realistic and abstract style of presentation used in “The Never-Yet-Explored,” Bold likens it to “the stream-of-consciousness narrative of Virginia Woolf” (148). He may be following Edwin Muir’s lead in comparing MacDiarmid to prominent modernists, as Muir argued “in the *New Age*, that ‘except Mr Joyce nobody at present is writing more resourceful English prose’” (Bold 147). However, this comparison may simply reflect the study’s attention to a female character as stylistically the study seems quite different from Woolf’s work.

Such comparisons contradict the lack of critical attention given to *Annals* in addition to mixed responses from its readers. When it was first published, “*Annals* was well received: the *Scotsman* judged it ‘readable and interesting...Gracefully written and suggestive’” (Bold 147). Additionally, “the *Glasgow Herald* bracketed the author with those ‘modern Scottish writers who are feeling their way to a permanent place in literature’; the *Times Literary Supplement* praised Grieve’s ‘novel and complicated harmonies’” in response to the text (Bold 147). Later critics, such as Roderick Watson, had more complex reactions, describing *Annals* as “[i]diosyncratic, exasperating, challenging, cliché-ridden, utterly brilliant and flawed by turns” (Introduction xv).

Such conflicting responses begin with the title that MacDiarmid chose for the text, which he borrowed from G. Gregory Smith’s *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919, 33).¹⁵ Few discuss the title’s relation to the form of the text, but annals follow a particular textual format that seems important here. They are historical reports that proceed year-by-year, and though the *OED* says they can take the form of a narrative, Hayden White suggests in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* that “the annals form lacks completely this narrative

component, since it consists only of a list of events ordered in chronological sequence” (5). Based on this definition, we could locate each of *Annals*’s numbered parts as a representative of a particular moment in time, though as “A Limelight” suggests, they may not necessarily go in chronological order.

When examining annals as a genre, the feeling of disconnection between the text’s parts fits the narrative and aesthetic dictates of this genre. In fact, White recognizes the “annalist’s apparent refusal, inability, or unwillingness to transform the set of events ordered vertically as a file of annual markers into the events of a linear/historical process” as one of its essential characteristics, particularly during the medieval period (6). Readers’ horizontal movement through each study is in tension with the text’s essentially vertical orientation. Such tension continues in the fact that “annals do not conclude; they simply terminate” (8). This form captures the “seemingly incomprehensible” nature of events, again particularly during the medieval era (10). An annals presents “a world in which things happen to people rather than one in which people do things” (10), and this description fits *Annals* perfectly, as the following analysis will demonstrate. In annals, “it is the forces of disorder, natural and human, the forces of violence and destruction, that occupy the forefront of attention” (10), and such is the focus of the first three studies.

From Smith, MacDiarmid borrowed not only the title but also an aesthetic model important to both *Annals* and the later *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Called the “Caledonian anti-syzygy,” this concept describes an attitude that values the “mixing of contraries” (4), the preservation of the tension between the parts that make up a whole, such as two (until recently accepted) binaries like male and female (34). The slash separating these binaries becomes as permeable as Michel Foucault suggested it should

be in *Discipline & Punish*.¹⁶ Anti-syzygies are theoretically similar to oxymorons in that to preserve the integrity of each element, a balance between global and local processing must be maintained (5). We must understand the shrimp as “jumbo” within a particular context. Examples of such paired contraries include “lust...and love, body and soul, passion and intellect, beauty and ugliness, matter and spirit, life and death, the real and the ideal, God and man, chaos and cosmos, oblivion and eternity” (Buthlay xxvi).

Smith and others have treated this as an ability particular among the Scots: “the Scottish sensibility was characteristically extreme, containing a combination of opposite tendencies,” giving the name to the Caledonian anti-syzygy, according to Roderick Watson (*Literature* 5). This ability affected the composition of Scottish literature, which Smith argues “at all periods has shown a readiness not only to accept the contrary moods more or less on equal terms, but to make the one blend imperceptibly into the other” (37).¹⁷ Yet, Edwin Muir later argued in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) that “the ‘Caledonian antiszyzygy’ was exactly what was *wrong* with the national psyche, for it would swing frantically from one extreme to the other without ever reading rest or resolution” (Watson, *Literature* 5). Thus, this ability was figured as a disability in a changing cultural climate. Since *Annals* was published earlier, the question remains: how exactly was the Caledonian anti-syzygy employed or embodied in this text?

The anxiety-free protagonist of “Cerebral” presents to the reader an image of how it might be successfully employed.

Night and day, city and country, sunshine and gaslight and electric blaze, myriad-faceted existences and his own extraordinarily vivid pictorial sense of his own cranial geography and anatomical activities were all covisible to him, I say, and

perfectly composed, without any conflict or strain. Nor were any of the elements permanent or passive. All of them lived, and each in perfect freedom, modifying or expanding, easing off or intensifying continually. They moved freely, each in its own particular whim, and they moved also with the unity of one impression. As one thing receded into unreality, the reality of the other and ever other things became newly apparent (albeit oddly familiar and repetitive). (MacDiarmid, *Annals* 6-7)

The narrator here presents a series of opposites whose simultaneous accessibility defies rules assumed to govern systems like time, geography, and optics. Neuro-normatively, we may assume that the presence of one (night) requires the absence of the other (day); for example, to be in the city, one cannot also be in the country. Yet, the protagonist here experiences these conditions comfortably “without any conflict or strain.”

For him, the Caledonian anti-syzygy is easy to achieve. Among these contraries, there is constant movement but also balance; he is able to have both harmony and dissonance at the same time. Based on his own processing abilities—demonstrated here—he argues that “a sense of the whole is the sign of a sound mind” (6), yet he does not seem to value *only* the whole. The elements of which it is composed are important parts of this process. Despite this inclusivity, he takes a clear neuro-normative stand that one must be able to balance the stimuli from one’s environment, or else one deserves the label of disability. However, he also recognizes “that there be many who have it [a sense of the whole] sadly to seek these days” (6). Though these individuals seem to be the majority, he pathologizes them for their inability to enact attitudes like the Caledonian anti-syzygy.

The second study “Café Scene,” presents a protagonist in a perceptual situation that is striking for its differences from the first. Its protagonist becomes disoriented by the intense sensations accosting him, which differ from those that he is accustomed to encountering in the same environment. Alan Bold reads “Cerebral” as “a remarkably vivid transcription of a mind almost stunned by its sensitivity to competing sensations” (91), but this description applies much more clearly to “Café Scene.” In “Cerebral,” the protagonist displays a similar sensitivity: he is “athrill with the miracle of sentience, quivering in every filament of his perceptions with an amazing aliveness” (MacDiarmid, *Annals* 7). Yet, for him, these sensory experiences are positive because he has the impressive ability to balance “the thousand and one other things of which severally and jointly he was just as acutely conscious and just as acutely critical” (6). His perceptions are “intricate, yet orderly,” not “import[ing] the least disharmony or friction” (6). He is prepared to deal with these sensations, which explains why he is mostly unfazed by the possibility that “[i]n a word, anything might happen—and nothing could happen (thus this fleeting mood!) that would surprise or perplex him or find him unequal to the strain” (9).¹⁸ This attitude places him in direct contrast to the protagonist of the next study, who appears thoroughly out of control throughout.

The control espoused by the protagonist of “Cerebral” is unusual for *Annals*, and even he cannot maintain this balance for the entire study. Toward its end, he recognizes that there are moments when “he would watch with painful realism the break-up of his mental life” (13). Then, he experiences a “sudden instability and nameless fear” that turn his brain into “a writhing mass of worms,” which any moment may “burst, deluging his mind in warm blood” (13). The language in this passage becomes much more violent

than in the surrounding text, reflecting the danger such moments pose and the fear that he attributes to them. The “[d]isunity and internecine hostility” attending such situations “tore him into shreds” (13). This experience of being “shredded,” or fragmented, appears to be produced by his inability to bring unity to his environment, to balance the ideas and sensations that he experiences. Though he does not locate a cause for such perceptual breakdowns, he does worry in such moments that he has “paralysed his creative faculties by overreading” (13). In this case, he would have caused such breakdowns himself, making him unable to balance the many difference references or ideas of which he has knowledge. This is one problem for readers of texts where allusions predominate.

Annals rivals *The Waste Land* in the number of allusions that it includes to different literary texts. MacDiarmid specifically describes his method regarding allusion thus in the “In Acknowledgment” section:

The old lady described Shakespeare as being full of quotations. So are my studies: I having deemed it desirable for the most part to show the psychological movements, with which I am mainly concerned, reflected through the current reading and cultural conditions of the characters involved.

As fish are seen through an aquarium so these perhaps strange fish of mine are discernible almost entirely through a strong solution of books and not only of books but of magazines and newspaper articles and even of speeches. What I have done is similar to what is done when a green light on a railway replaces a red light, or vice versa, in a given lamp. (4)

Based on this passage, MacDiarmid sees allusions as contributing to the reader’s understanding of a character’s “psychological movement,” or the way in which (s)he

thinks. In texts like *Annals* that follow the direction of a character's thoughts, allusions are an important part of such cognitive movement because they show give the reader indirect knowledge about a character's education, background, and interests. They connect characters to particular communities, and in recognizing an allusion, a reader develops a closer relationship with the character through a shared form of life. In this case, MacDiarmid positions them as the water that allows his "fish"—whether this ambiguous noun refers to the studies themselves or the characters, or perhaps both—to move and breathe; allusions help these characters to exist in their own worlds and in the reader's imagination. In the final line, MacDiarmid suggests that by including so many allusions, he also facilitates the reader's movement forward through the text at a normal speed, as a green light would indicate to a railway conductor. Based on analysis in the previous section, however, this explanation may be contestable.

Though the Acknowledgement section recognizes some 23 authors and/or sources that appear in *Annals*, MacDiarmid admits that he "cannot now trace" all of them (4). It is unclear for what reason these sources cannot be traced, whether because he does not remember what they were or for a more deliberate purpose. The latter seems more likely as the first study, "Cerebral," which directly follows the "In Acknowledgement" section, opens with an unattributed epigraph from George Cabot Lodge's "The Great Adventure" (1905). All of the other studies open in the same way: with an epigraph, though in some cases its provenance is acknowledged (71) and in others, it may be a "false" epigraph (positioned as one, but actually written by the author, 62). MacDiarmid does not recognize Lodge in his list of explicit acknowledgements, nor does he recognize William Wordsworth, a reference to whose poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1804, 20),

opens the second study, “Café Scene.” It is difficult to compare the extent of MacDiarmid’s allusions in this text to Eliot’s because no annotated version of *Annals* has yet been produced. In fact, it only came back into print with Carcanet in 1999.

These are only a couple of instances that represent a general trend within *Annals* not to acknowledge authors of the allusions that he includes. In the past, this literary technique caused MacDiarmid some trouble as he repeatedly faced charges of plagiarism with his essays and poetry—specifically, regarding the poem “Perfect” in 1965. His approach in *Annals* differs from Eliot’s approach in *The Waste Land* first because he only includes a few notes, whereas Eliot includes pages of them (disregarding at this moment their complex relationship with the text itself). Unlike Eliot, MacDiarmid does allude specifically to some authors and works, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Youth* (1902, 64), Rupert Brooke’s *Great Lover* (1913, 63), and Francis Thompson’s “Her Portrait” (67). These instances coincide with places where MacDiarmid sets allusions off as block quotations—using textual formatting to indicate that they are, in fact, allusions to other works. Eliot, on the contrary, integrates allusions much more smoothly into the text itself. Such moments in *Annals*, where allusions are called out as allusions, may trick readers into thinking that no allusions are present where they are not called out—a mistake as “Café Scene,” among others, shows (25). Yet, MacDiarmid’s practice of often not providing authorial attribution allows the space that exists before and after each block quotation to function as spaces for reflection, whereas if the author and text were evident, readers would be likely to move more quickly through them. MacDiarmid’s placement of these allusions breaks the linearity of the text, suggesting that readers move not just

forward through it but outward as well, thereby contradicting his allusion to railways and forward movement in the Acknowledgements.

Returning to the studies themselves, “Café Scene” contrasts with “Cerebral” in presenting a more extended moment of such imbalance. In it, the protagonist arrives in “a well-known tea shop, one which,” he tells the reader, “I have frequented for years and years” (26). However, the tea shop is no longer a place where he is comfortable; instead, the sensations that he perceives defy the laws that govern the world he knows: “the tea-cups appeared to be twinkling with an unusual rapidity and the little circular tables to be going round at such an intense speed that they deceived the eye, any eye but his, with a seeming immobility!” (22). Such formerly familiar locations and everyday objects, such as these teacups and tables, no longer provide the comfort that he expects. Instead, the format of his daily newspaper becomes a series of “bizarre geometrical experiments,” and he recoils from “the flaming effrontery of a bunch of cheap roses, brutally red! The hot offensive dampness of an afternoon edition!” (21-22). The sensations that he experiences in contact with these objects defy years of interactions with their like as their color and texture gain new intensity. Further contributing to this disorientation, the protagonist cannot sit at his normal table because it has been taken by the “Thundercloud,” “a titanic figure” of a man “discharging a dark incalculable belligerency” (22).

Throughout the study, the narrator and protagonist focus on the “vivid” nature of the latter’s surroundings as their new life shocks him out of his processing habits (20). Everything around him is moving more than it ever has before: the tea-cups “twinkle,” faces “leap,” eyes “swin[g] like lanterns,” “corners of houses...split into his thoughts like an elbow in the ribs,” and “the glittering unsteady counter” is “scintillating and swaying”

(21, 20, 23, 21). These perceptions produce in him a correspondingly “seismic” “state of mind” (21): objects around him are moving so much that they incite in him a figurative earthquake, which unsettles his beliefs about the world in which he lives. Yet, as he recognizes in the previous paragraph, these objects may have always been moving thus, and he just may not have seen it. Now, he experiences “countless excruciating and simultaneous impressions” because “the processes of his brain [were] obscurely altered, the selective methods of his senses subtly different” (27, 21). Despite the force of this change, its cause remains unclear—as it does for such moments in “Cerebral”—an unanswered question that looms over the text.

The force and strangeness of these sensations drive the protagonist into the position of perpetual observer and reactor. He is left to take them in “helplessly,” “[w]ith his eyes starting out of his head” (26). As he remains in this situation, these experiences have such adverse effects on his body that the reader may wonder why does he not leave. They make him feel “an extraordinary sense of intolerable belittlement...It was as if a dwarfing process had set i[t]. He would soon have no more stature than a fly” (22). This moment evokes the scene from *Alice in Wonderland* where she drinks a potion and shrinks enough to walk through a particularly small doorway. However, the narrator treats this experience not as enabling but as *disabling*. The protagonist of “Café Scene” loses control whereas Alice gains control, a state similar to that experienced by the protagonist of “Cerebral.” Such intense and unfamiliar sensations leave the former feeling powerless and afraid, in a state of mind where “the slightest incident or impression, negligently admitted, might set up unthinkable conditions of terror. Every cell of his body and his brain seemed, separately and conjointly, poised on the very edge

of an unknown that was both ludicrous and fatal” (23). Again, this state of overload has carries extreme fear and potential violence, positioning the protagonist on a precipice—the point of a breakdown or explosion—from the beginning to the end of this study.

At the study’s close, MacDiarmid conveys the physical weight and value of the protagonist’s sensations using syllepsis. At the protagonist tries to leave the tea shop, MacDiarmid writes that “[h]e received his change and countless excruciating and simultaneous impressions ranging from a feminine eyebrow twisted into the shape of a question mark to a sense of his boots rooting to the tiles of the floor” (27). Again, the protagonist is a passive recipient, in this case of both the literal money and also his figurative impressions. This statement gives weight to his sensations by comparing them with the heavy yet valuable metals of which coins are made, like silver. The comparison also suggests that these sensations could be used elsewhere as tender, material offered to another in an act of exchange and communication. Thus, it conflicts with the characterization elsewhere of the protagonist’s situation as a disability.

The narrator takes such a position by presenting the protagonist’s situation as a “peculiar and unsupportable condition,” language that negatively compares the protagonist’s perceptions to those that another person would experience in the same situation: the world appears “disproportioned” to him, like an “optical illusion” or an “insane aberration” (21, 25, 21). As the last phrase suggests, the narrator locates the protagonist as having wandered from the path that neuro-normates follow when processing sensory stimuli, which opens him to the label of mental illness. Describing his image of his environment as a “caricature” furthers this negative reading by again (21). A caricature is a “representation of persons or things by exaggeration of their most

characteristic and striking features” (*OED*). The protagonist produces a caricature by focusing too much on the “little everyday things” in his environment like teacups, counters, and the corners of houses, and the narrator’s description suggests that the protagonist may be amplifying the extremity of the situation (21). Typically, artists drawing caricatures do so to achieve a comic effect, but while this situation may seem comic at times to the reader—as the protagonist strives not to smash his teacup into its saucer, for instance—it is certainly not so to the protagonist.

To emphasize the intensity of these experiences, MacDiarmid alters the style that he uses in this study: he introduces a profusion of exclamation points, uses unconventional grammar, and introduces figurative language so strong it may seem hyperbolic. For instance, the protagonist’s experience walking down the street is presented thus: “A line between two flagstones on the pavement, suddenly a yawning chasm! A cough behind him which gave him the feeling of having been buried under an avalanche! Feet splaying at angles suggestive of the most irreconcilable and meaningless divergences! A tall man instantly precipitous! A woman’s waist expanding equatorially!” (22). The words in these phrases are arranged so as to draw attention to the subject that preoccupies the protagonist’s attention, and many sentences in this study are much shorter than those in the previous study. Every sentence in the passage above—though none are grammatically complete—ends with an exclamation point, as do many more in this study than “Cerebral.” The intensity of each sensory moment makes the transition between sensations look even more abrupt. This approach leaves the reader in danger of becoming immune to such heightened intensity, a danger Nietzsche recognizes in “The Case of Wagner.” Despite the protagonist’s seemingly dire circumstances, the unusual

metaphors that MacDiarmid introduces diverge so radically from neuro-normative experience that they may push such passages toward the comic for many readers.

MacDiarmid acknowledges such attention to experiences like these, which may seem unimportant, as one of *Annals*'s principle characteristics and one that is likely to mystify readers. In the Dedication, he writes, "The greater part of readers, instead of blaming us for passing trifles, will wonder that on mere trifles so much labour is expended. To them I answer with confidence that they are judging of an art which they do not understand" (3). The issue that he locates here is that people may not see the value of presenting—or processing—the subjects, perceptions, or experiences that *Annals* treats. In response, "Café Scene" follows up on "Cerebral" by giving these "trifles" perceptual weight and showing the severe effects that they have on the protagonist. It creates the opportunity for the reader to re-evaluate the relevance and amount of attention everyday objects or experiences deserve, and what we might see or feel if we did distribute our attention differently.

Some readers may conclude that this study represents a schizophrenic break, which makes it easier to compartmentalize and thereby avoid the protagonist's experiences. However, the protagonist does not seem to feel persecuted by people, but instead by his sensory apparatuses. While the protagonist nicknames the other man in the café "Thundercloud," he recognizes that the Thundercloud's furor is "directed against the world at large, it seemed and only incidentally and fortuitously against himself" (22). He cannot understand why he never felt these sensations before, though, and now that he is feeling them, why his eyes and ears would convey sensations that affect him so negatively. Though many of these sensations could be described as hallucinations—are

the teacups truly spinning?—these objects are certainly present and the narrator describes them as having violent physical effects suggesting that the exploding brain the protagonist of “Cerebral” feared may come to pass. For instance, “[c]orners of houses had split into his thoughts like an elbow in the ribs,” and “The glittering motion of a bicycle wheel had communicated a wild dizziness” (21).

The state of “internal agitation” presented in “Café Scene” produces a state of mental exhaustion, which MacDiarmid describes in the next study, “A Four Years’ Harvest” as being “puggled” (23, 36). Those affected are so filled with information and/or sensations that more must be packed in with a stick—or else the stick used to make additional space (“Puggle,” *OED*). “Puggled” can also mean “drunk,” which introduces an interesting connection between the cognitive styles of the central characters in *Annals* and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. This third study deals with some of the same cognitive and perceptual issues as the previous two; however, I focus less on it here because it has received more critical attention, primarily because in it MacDiarmid describes the experience of a British soldier in Salonika during World War I—of which he was one.

The narrator of this study characterizes his experience in the war as one filled with the contraries that those who can enact the Caledonian anti-syzygy enjoy: “[o]n all sides the mind was baffled by paradox...the co-existent sensation of living on a volcano edge and of being bored to death on a front comparatively uneventful to others” (35-36). Living between these contraries demands balance, which as we have seen, can be difficult to achieve; the narrator suggests it is more difficult to achieve in this case because of their extremity. Instead, the demands of living in such precarity produce a

mental state in which the soldiers “became unable to size things up” (36), or determine the relation between one event, object, or sensation and another. As a result, the narrator is left to cope with “the bewildering hopelessness of trying to sort out his impressions and come to any considered conclusion” (31). As the etymology of “bewilder” suggests, soldiers like the protagonist are led astray from the path that they typically follow when processing sensations, unprepared to deal with these conditions (*OED*). They are left in a sort of limbo between extremes, confronted by what the narrator describes as “polychromatic chaos” (36).

Based on the protagonist’s situation, this study naturally follows the previous two. In the first, the protagonist copes easily with balancing sensations, while in the second, he is in a state of complete sensory overload. The third presents the protagonist in a moment of calm that follows moments like that presented in the second study, searching for the stability present in the first. The reader knows about the prior circumstances thanks to the narrator, who confirms that “For the soldier the rush of impressions had been tremendous, beyond the possibility of assimilation. The course of events had been so rapid and tortuous withal that it had been well nigh impossible to follow it, although paradoxically it had often been their complaint that ‘nothing ever happens out here’” (35). The protagonist is now left in this moment of calm to try to “assimilate” the sensations he experienced, to absorb them into his existing frame of reference as one absorbs nutrients into the body now that “[t]he crisis was over once again, once again” (28). The repetition of the final phrase emphasizes the cyclical nature of these experiences; where there is a valley, there will be yet another peak.

While in this space, it is up to the protagonist to find a way to express himself again, to escape the “conspiracy of misunderstanding” that the War has produced (32). For him, it means pursuing a “reviving trust in a centre of unity” (33). Despite his exhaustion and awareness that another peak may soon arrive, the protagonist still believes that somehow these extremes can be unified and described while still preserving their integrity. He believes he can become adept at managing the Caledonian anti-syzygy. Though his experiences have upset the strategies that he used before to produce such unity, he maintains hope that new strategies might exist and that he can adapt enough to employ them.

However, tension still remains between the figure of the mosaic and the Caledonian anti-syzygy, and resolving this tension may provide insight into the way forward for this protagonist. To fully appreciate a mosaic, one sees past the parts toward a whole; yet, that strategy does not seem to work in the contexts that *Annals* presents in the second and third studies. Instead of the mosaic, Smith suggests another compositional model as common among Scottish writers: the conglomerate. These writers strove for realism by creating what he describes as “a conglomeration of details” (9, 15). Like a mosaic, a conglomerate is composed of many small pieces that when cemented together form a spatially larger body; however, their particularity is preserved to a greater extent than in a mosaic. No image exists to blend and thereby usurp the elements of which it is composed. Yet, MacDiarmid chooses to describe his studies as mosaics not conglomerates, which was no doubt a deliberate decision as he borrows other elements from Smith’s text, but not this one. By calling them mosaics but still using other language from Smith, MacDiarmid could be attempting to achieve more of a balance between the

two approaches, positioning them via the Caledonian anti-syzygy as contraries that must be managed and maintained together.

In his essay “Art and the Unknown” (1926), MacDiarmid writes that “Comprehensibility is error: Art is beyond understanding” (44), but this position contradicts the approach that each protagonist is taking in the first three studies. They all want comprehension; whether it is available to them or not is another story. This inconsistency raises several questions: Should our desires when encountering art differ from those we have when processing our environments at large? If not, then does MacDiarmid support the search for understanding, in which his protagonists engage, or reject it, based on his aesthetic philosophy? If so, how do we reconcile the demands of these two different situations?

Modernism and the Blurry Boundaries of H.D.’s *Palimpsest*

In the first decade of the twentieth century, H.D. was primarily known as an Imagist, an author of poetry that used a direct, concrete style to present a single image. According to Amy Lowell, this style of writing relies on details to “produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite” (240). As she clarified elsewhere, in the American anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, “we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous” (qtd. in Lowell 240). This philosophy influenced H.D.’s first collection of poetry, *Sea Garden* (1916), though after World War I, she moved toward a different manner of presentation. *Palimpsest* (1926) marks a definite break with the aesthetic philosophy of Imagism.

This text was published by Contact Editions, which was run by Robert McAlmon, the husband of H.D.'s partner Bryher.¹⁹ H.D. has divided the novel into three sections, each of which has a different female writer for its protagonist. The first section concentrates on Hipparchia, a Greek poet living in the Roman Empire around 75 B.C., and this section bears her name as its title. The second section, "Murex," introduces Raymonde Ransome, an American poet living in interwar London. Helen Fairwood, an American journalist living in London, is the protagonist of the third section, "Secret Name," which takes place during the 1925 excavation of King Tutankhamen's tomb. The table of contents provides a timeline to help readers to locate the different layers temporally, yet no direction is given as to the relationship between them—either in the table of contents or the text itself.

As the title implies, H.D. uses the palimpsest as the artistic model for this text. According to the text's cover, a *palimpsest* is "a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another." It is a surface that retains traces of multiple texts created at different points in time, though it is the erasure of the earlier text that makes it possible for the later one to exist.²⁰ To accommodate them all in the same space, their legibility—their accessibility to the eye and, consequently, the brain—suffers. Thus, a palimpsest is a text that has multiple layers of writing whose relationship is difficult to decipher; they are separate yet connected. Without referring to H.D.'s text, Hugh Kenner locates the palimpsest as an important figure for modernism in his essay "Poets at the Blackboard" (1982).

Palimpsest presents three narratives in the same textual space; though they have different narrators and different geographical and temporal settings, they seem to repeat

the same story. By positioning them next to each other within the covers of the same text, she emphasizes both the similarities and differences among them. Despite their proximity, however, H.D. makes little attempt to resolve their relationship, leaving the reader to puzzle it out. She slows readers' attempts to consume the text as a whole—and thereby integrate it with their prior knowledge—by using its form to raise questions that she leaves unanswered. The book's binding frames the text, giving the impression that it constitutes a unified object. Based on this convention, the three parts of *Palimpsest* could be read as sections of a single novel. Its covers would mark the beginning and end of the cognitive processing required to consume what they contain, but this relationship feels too confined for *Palimpsest*. Cassandra Laity also proposes that they could be separate novels of a trilogy. The trilogy is a common textual form for H.D., and *Palimpsest* itself is part of one (with *Asphodel* and *Hedylus*). However, “trilogy” is too broad a term to adequately describe the relationship between these sections, and describing it as such removes the ambiguity concerning their connection, which the title preserves.

Deborah Kelly Kloepper takes another approach, which may be the most fruitful for considering the relationship between *Palimpsest*'s three sections. She considers it as a triptych because this text, like others written by H.D., “do[es] not move forward from the initial telling but rather back inside it, altering the landmarks but never leaving the original ‘scene’” (556). Analyzing *Palimpsest* as a triptych draws attention to the layered and recursive nature of these three sections. This figure elicits cognitive movement contradicting the conventional ways readers are expected to move through novels. A “triptych” (from the Greek, *tri-* “three” and *ptyx* “fold, layer”) can refer to either the three-leaved writing tablets used in the ancient world or an altarpiece, a distinction that

matters for our understanding of *Palimpsest*. If we compare the text to a series of ancient tablets, then each leaf has the same status; however, considering it in relation to the altarpiece suggests that the central story may dominate the lateral ones.

Though H.D. makes sure that we cannot resolve this relationship, *Palimpsest*'s central narrative does seem to dominate. It takes place in London during the period in which H.D. was writing the text, and of the three sections, it deals most with details of her own life.²¹ This information seems particularly relevant since H.D. is known for the semi-autobiographical nature of her texts. Also, the section's title indicates that it is an object of great value. Murexes are mollusks found in the Mediterranean that produce a secretion used to produce the unusual Tyrian purple dye for fabric. Valued by ancient civilizations, such as the ones depicted in *Palimpsest*, the murex is difficult to obtain. This dye became more intense, as opposed to fading, with age (likely because the color change in the mucus itself was activated by contact with the air). Hipparchia wears garments of this color, given to her by her second lover, Quintus Verrus, though she does later reject them in favor of her former yellow garments.

The title for this section also alludes to Robert Browning's poem "Popularity" (1855), and H.D. includes a line from this poem on the page preceding it, which she repeats later in the text (133, 226). As with many of the allusions made by Eliot and MacDiarmid, H.D. does not attribute this line to anyone, but she does put it first in quotation marks and later in italics, suggesting its status as allusion to the reader. In his poem, Browning depicts the poet as a fisherman searching for murexes. In both the poem and *Palimpsest*, murexes serve as a metaphor for the verses of a poem, which Ransome spends much of the section struggling to compose. She explicitly makes this connection,

arguing that “They [verses] dyed all existence with their color” (226). Thus, Browning’s poem and the connection between the ambiguous poet depicted there, who Jerome Thale argues represents John Keats, adds yet another layer to the text.²²

Palimpsest is a text of many layers, in the sense that it is composed of multiple texts, as discussed previously, and many different women contribute to its production. In this case, the word “layers” refers to the multiple texts inscribed at different times on the parchment’s surface and also the narrators who have placed the texts, much as bricklayers place bricks. This definition evokes reproductive activities like textual creation (e.g., a bricklayer creates a wall much as an artist composes a mosaic) and physical reproduction (e.g., a hen lays eggs like Ransome writes verses). Within the text, the literal and figurative profiles of these women cross time and space to create an overlapping portrait. For instance, the female protagonists overlap both within sections, as with Hipparchia and her mother, and between sections, as with Hipparchia and Ransome. The protagonists and texts also overlap temporally as the third section takes place during the same period as the second. Finally, the narrator and H.D. herself overlap with the protagonists because the text mixes interior monologue and third-person narration. As in *Annals*, it is difficult not to read the narrator’s limited omniscience as the protagonist speaking about herself or H.D.

H.D. develops composite images of not only the sections and the female characters, but also the male characters. Though they occupy a subordinate position, the men in *Palimpsest* are also layered between and within sections. Each section presents a female protagonist attracted to a soldier who has recently fought in a war. In this respect and others, Marius, Freddie, and Captain Rafton all seem to be representations of each

other. They may be versions of Richard Aldington, H.D.'s husband, whose participation in the First World War was no doubt fresh in H.D.'s mind when she wrote this text. The men within the first (Quintus Verrus and Marius) and second (Martin and Freddie) sections are also layered.

The protagonist of the second section, Raymonde Ransome, recognizes the complex relationship that these men, and also the women who interact with them, share: she sees a “webbed and beautifully veiled composite picture of three overlapping faces and three overlapping interweaving realms of consciousness” (195). Here, the three faces appear to be Ransom; her husband, Freddie; and her friend, Mavis, with whom Freddie had an affair. Describing this image as “webbed” adds a third dimension to the flat image, relating it to a piece of fabric based on the word’s etymology and her later use of the verb “interweaving” (*OED*). She also recognizes the complexity of their relationship by describing it as a “composite,” one example of which is a conglomerate. Yet, its particularities are “veiled” or unable to be seen clearly. Based on Ransome’s presentation, this image sounds like yet another palimpsest. As the protagonists and readers strive to see this image clearly, things are never quite what they appear: “[b]ehind the Botticelli, there was another Botticelli, behind London there was another London, behind Raymonde Ransome there was (odd and slightly crude but somehow ‘taking’ nom-de-guerre) Ray Bart” (147). This quotation becomes a mantra for the narrator, which reminds her that all bodies—whether art, human, or composite—are combinations of surface and depth, multidimensional figures never fully apprehended.

Based on their cognitive style, neuro-normates will be driven to locate one dominant image within the three, as with the triptych version of the palimpsest. Yet, the

proliferation of elements within each palimpsest and palimpsests within the overall text works to thwart this drive. H.D. places neuro-normative readers in a position similar to that of the protagonists: they are left seeking coherence in an environment that actively works against them. Any attempts to privilege one part of the palimpsest over the others can be only provisional. As with the Caledonian anti-syzygy in the last chapter, elements of *Palimpsest* conflict without presenting a clear resolution; however, the protagonists must reach some form of equilibrium to remain functional within their larger environment.

To emphasize this struggle, the narrator of *Palimpsest* compares the third protagonist, Mrs. Fairwood, to a circus performer trying to keep her balance:

Like a juggler, she considered two regions, two shining and slippery worlds, to be balanced carefully, lest one, lest the other topple her over; she must keep suspended, she must hold balanced, two exactly shaped, exactly weighted, yet mysteriously exactly antagonistic worlds. She must keep, miraculously, by very cautious manipulation, her own balance meanwhile. She must keep her own balance, like a tightrope walker, by the very use of this couple of heavy balls, these worlds, one at either end of some sort of slender balancing pole (her every-day self?) themselves serving to keep her firm, while step by step she must continue her difficult experiment, her prowl. (251, 322)²³

In this passage, the narrator presents Mrs. Fairwood in a dangerous situation where she could easily lose control of her body and fall; to capture her precarious situation, the narrator combines the act of juggling with walking a tightrope. Both activities are typically performed to entertain others, which invokes an audience of silent observers to

this scene. Juggling requires serious concentration and motor control, and when combined with a tightrope, it requires even more concentration and balance. However, the situation that the narrator describes sounds much more like tightrope walking than juggling as the latter typically requires three objects or more; only two are represented here. The “two worlds” being juggled become the two weights on either end of the stick she uses to balance while walking the tightrope.

The narrator recognizes that the sensory properties of the objects that Mrs. Fairwood threaten her control within this already precarious situation. The objects emit or reflect light, which could easily distract, even blind, her; their surfaces are difficult to grasp, too smooth to facilitate an easy catch if being juggled; and they weigh more than objects in either role should, requiring not just mental but physical strength. These properties mean that the worlds can easily impede her movement rather than assisting it, as they should in their balancing role. When considered in relation to the Caledonian anti-syzygy, these worlds represent the two contraries that are in tension. This scene captures the difficulty of maintaining the balance required to preserve the anti-syzygy.

Forming coherence from diverse stimuli requires a similar balancing act, one that is easily disturbed, and texts like *Palimpsest* drive their readers to recognize how difficult it is for an individual to maintain perceptual balance. Amy Lowell describes H.D.’s prewar work as “an art of balance, of repose” (261), but the method presented here contrasts with the author’s earlier style. The text itself models an aesthetic philosophy that H.D.’s protagonists see springing from the interwar period itself. As Ransome recognizes in the second section, “Art wasn’t seen anymore in one plane, in one perspective, in one dimension. One didn’t any more see things like that. Impressions were

reflected now, the salt²⁴ had lost—they were overlaid like old photographic negatives one on top of another” (218). H.D. here refers to the salted paper prints that photographers made between 1840 and 1860 using a process called “photogenic drawing” developed by William Henry Fox Talbot. The photographer could produce an image by soaking a piece of paper in salted water and then coating one side with silver nitrate. The salt, combined with the silver nitrate, made the paper sensitive to light. After the paper dried, a negative was placed overtop, and then light would activate the chemicals to transfer the image. Coating the paper with salt again could prevent the image from changing, another important innovation because, according to J. P. Ward, “One of the greatest problems of 19th-century photography was the fading of prints.” However, the additional salt coating proved unstable and was later replaced by potassium bromide or sodium thiosulphate. (Ward). H.D. recognizes the instability of this attempt to preserve the distinctness of an impression in a photograph by invoking the salting technique. Though for a time impressions may have seemed to be singular, clear, and distinct, now they are faded and one can see behind them the outlines of other impressions, residue of the past.

As a textual form, the palimpsest reminds us that a single object—or even, a concept like reality—can have multiple, interpenetrating layers with indistinct boundaries. The reader can either take each layer on its own terms, as a whole in itself, or attempt to bring these layers together, an action that calls for them to be balanced with great effort, as Mrs. Fairfield balanced her two worlds. A reader who does the former will never see the whole, and though the whole may never be accessible, at least one who tries to balance the different layers has made the effort.

Ransome tries to achieve this goal in a situation where she feels out of control, and to do so, she adopts a stereotypy that will blur her perceptions. This term's etymological root, "blear," refers to the fact that watery eyes—as in tears—dim one's vision. For example, water can also blur one's vision if the protagonist tries to see through an "over-blur of autumn mist" (136) or if someone only incompletely washes away the ink of a text (as in a palimpsest). This blurred state figures importantly in other texts by H.D., including *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919). In this text, H.D. describes what she calls her "over-mind" as a "lens" that must be "properly adjusted, focused" to "bring the world of vision into consciousness" (23). The over-mind can also be thought of as "a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting my eyes. Sometimes when I am in that state of consciousness, things about me appear slightly blurred as if seen under water" (18). In this case, water serves the same connecting function as it would if present in *The Waste Land*.

London fosters such conditions with the figurative fog that it induces: "London did this to her, blurred her acute perceptions so that inevitably at the end of her half-year visit...she would let go perception, let go arrow-vibrant thought. London did this to her. It blurred over too alert perception, it so to speak, snuffed out vibration of too keen thinking" (135). The blurred-over state induced by the city erases distinctions to produce the illusion of harmony where there may in fact be dissonance. It allows Ransome to ignore the acute perceptions that disturb her mental comfort so much that H.D. compares them to sudden acts of violence like arrows and "lightning" (243). In comparison, London's fog "soothed her nerves, that blurred down, softening odd jagged corners, letting nothing so poignant as mere tragedy be admitted to its suave and enveloping

depth” (139). Fairwood carries this description of “the blur of London” even into the next section (291). As it does for Ransome, this blur makes her perceptions less acute and vibrant; thus, they become more manageable. For both characters, it makes the contrast between elements of their environment less striking and produces a physical state that the narrator of the middle section compares to a “cocoon-blur of not thinking” (136). By introducing the image of a cocoon, the narrator recognizes that this state only temporarily protects Ransome from her acute perceptions by allowing her to revert to an impermanent infant-like state.²⁵ For Ransome, blurriness functions in the same way that it does for many autists—it creates a shell that dulls her experience of the environment—and listening to a repetitive sound helps to produce this effect. It enables her to leave her experienced looking fragmented and not search out the connections between them.

Ransome produces this cognitive fog by listening for the sound of “feet, feet, feet, feet, feet.” The reader of *Palimpsest* listens to this sound with Ransome as H.D. repeats it continually throughout the middle section. This repeated phrase represents the movement of people on the streets, a sound that permeates Ransome’s apartment and her mind. Like other stereotypies, focusing on the sound of feet allows her to escape from a confusing and painful environment. This stereotypy is only possible in London, though, because the city and the sounds it produces are interchangeable for Ransome. There, “one never knew the barrier of day and night, one never outlined accurately the barrier of summer, spring and autumn” (135). This sound blurs boundaries of multiple kinds, not just temporal ones: “That pain and that sound and that rhythm of pain and that rhythm of departure were indissolubly wedded” (206). Consequently, Ransome exists in a liminal state that the narrator likens to “a foggy Limbo and one’s only hope was to be drowned out in it.

One's only hope was drift and obliteration" (172). Listening to this repeated sound fosters a state of mind that prevents her from having to reflect on and locate the relationship between parts of the past that she finds painful. Based on the etymology of "obliterate," Ransome's stereotypy literally effaces the past and future from the text—much as a writer of a palimpsest would erase an earlier text.²⁶

For Ransome, then, the sound of feet dulls the past and certain events that she does not want to face. The reader learns that "She came to London to forget—feet, feet, feet" (140), but in going there to forget, she is also forced to remember. This sound distracts her from certain events but it also forces her to remember others: the sound of men marching to the troop trains or outside her house in Corfe Castle during World War I. It was during this time that she lost her baby and husband. Somehow, remembering the War distracts her from this more upsetting information. Ransome does not want to hear or feel herself, but instead, the city and the War. The fog that her stereotypy creates makes it so she has to sift through "Layer and layer of pain, of odd obliteration" to reach her past (154); to reach the first layer of the palimpsest, she has to work backward through all of the subsequent ones. We can read Ransome and many others in her generation as trapped on the border between two worlds—the past and the present—but "limbo" can also refer to "a condition of neglect or oblivion to which persons or things are consigned when regarded as outworn, useless, or absurd" ("Limbo," *OED*). Such is the category for young people who lived through the War, the so-called Lost Generation. It is somehow easier for Ransome to claim affiliation with this group than to recognize other elements of her past.²⁷ Ransome remains in limbo partly because she is no longer sure what should matter in this interwar world. Her world appears incoherent if viewed

from a pre-war perspective, and a major force that contributes to her overall uncertainty is the status of poetry during this period. Has it come through the War or become irrelevant?

The extent of this uncertainty turns Ransome's stereotypy into a drug of sorts. She sees this parallel because of the power that the stereotypy has to alter her perception and memory. As such, Ransome compares London to the home of the lotus-eaters in Homer's *The Odyssey*. This "island of forgetfulness" produces "a lotos-drug," "Sleep fumes to dull the perception" that make existence more comfortable for Ransome (228, 138, 243). It distances her from what is happening in her present and what has happened in her past, a state that is represented by the repetitions of "far and far and far" that appear in the text (183). This distance produces a blurred picture because she is too far away from these events to see their distinctions.

The mediated state that London induces in her can also be likened to a dream, though she finally recognizes that "London was a *bad* dream. London was a state of paradisial drifting that would become a bad dream if she so further drifted" (italics mine; 243). Ransome paradoxically compares London to nightmare and paradise, a description that makes sense with the myth of the lotus-eaters. She knows that if she leaves London, she will awaken and be forced to confront the fragmented appearance of her environment. When the sound of feet no longer exists, "the clear Alpine air inevitably focussed, brought her mind to almost clairvoyant intensity of vision" (140; misspelling in original). The mountain air here has a distinctly different effect on the speaker than it does in *The Waste Land*. Marie finds that "In the mountains, there you feel free" (line 17), but Ransome has a distinctly different experience in the mountains. Like Ermy's presence,

the air “force[s] her out of her delicious blurred state, to think, think, think, think, think” (*Palimpsest* 140). For Ransome, thinking is restricting not liberating. Thus, she wants to stay in London, whose sounds deter her from thinking, feeling, and writing—exactly those activities that require her to reflect upon her current situation and the more specific relation between the elements of her environment.

Before her epiphany, Ransome finds it overwhelming to experience the unblurred present because to do so she must continue writing—continue her search for the murex.²⁸ Like Ransome, H.D. was greatly concerned with the possibilities for poetry after the Great War, anxieties that emerge in *Palimpsest*. According to the narrator, “There would be poets, there would be poets, there would be poets. Raymonde had even till the last held to it—but where were they?” (191). During this period, H.D. found her path to comprehension barred, confronted by a similar lack of coherence. In a letter to John Cournos written several years before the publication of *Palimpsest*, she writes, “I am working through a wood, a tangle of bushes and bracken out to a clearing, where I may see again” (qtd. in Hollenberg 148). Writing becomes a means for H.D. to strengthen her perceptions: “in order to clear the ground, I have tried to write things down—in order to think straight, I have endeavored to write straight” (qtd. in 148). Yet, her assessment here suggests that she is trying to adhere to conventional spatial models, which value both straight writing and thinking. She may have been able to achieve success in *Palimpsest* because she eschewed such models and instead created layers of writing that call for the development of multidimensional connections, straight or not.

As Ransome’s section demonstrates, strong coherence comes at a cost; while her stereotypy facilitates her everyday functioning, it also obscures the details of her

environment and allows her to avoid the subjects that make her uncomfortable. Ezra Pound criticizes H.D. for just utilizing what appears to be a similar aesthetics. In a 1917 letter, he comments that H.D.'s current work "let loose dilutions and repetitions, so that she has spoiled the 'few but perfect' position which she might have held onto" (qtd. in Engel 508).²⁹ The word that Pound creates here, *dilutation*, captures an important aspect of the aesthetics at work in *Palimpsest*. Pound merges *dilution* (dissolve, weaken) and *dilatation* (make wider, expand, enlarge) to argue that the power of H.D.'s texts weakened as she widened their focus. He sees a limited perspective, such as that employed in Imagism, as a strength; however, he does not seem to recognize that H.D. continues to employ a series of such limited perspectives in texts like *Palimpsest*. Even though she widens her focus beyond the limits of a short poem, she still presents her novel as three seemingly separate stories and requires the reader to widen the perspective on his or her own. H.D. strategically uses the same cognitive style as individuals with autism—weak central coherence, which I discussed in the last chapter—and uses Ransome to demonstrate the consequences of strong coherence. Neither style will produce a complete image of the environment, which Ransome seems to recognize by the end of her section.

Palimpsest presents an environment in which both the protagonists and readers must labor to locate connections between different elements. Ransome uses a stereotypy to increase her comfort and eventually enable her to expend the cognitive effort necessary to locate such connections. Based particularly on the middle section, *Palimpsest* contradicts Lowell's reading of H.D. as "quite unaffected by the world around her" (275). H.D.'s protagonists are so affected by the world around them that they have to protect

themselves from it. When compared to her earlier Imagism, H.D.'s interwar work appears to be a striking aesthetic divergence. Critics have lauded H.D. for her progressive feminism, but she has received much less attention for the aesthetic complexity of her texts. Uncertainty and the attendant anxiety can be powerful forces that work against our productive capacities; sometimes, to be functional in a confusing environment, we may need our stereotypes.

These three sections have provided a series of examples that suggest using the word "fragment" to describe their aesthetic limits the kinds of connections that we can see between the elements within these texts, which extend out into the world. It positions us as literary critics as seeking a kind of closure that is explicitly not valued by the texts themselves and their authors. Continuing to use it positions critics as reading against the grain, and not in the productive way often associated with the term. Instead, this approach imposes a neuro-normative critical framework on these texts, just as Frith and those who support the theory of weak central coherence do to autists. Though two elements may appear disconnected, a different approach may reveal a connection that was otherwise ignored or not otherwise perceived. Reading modernist texts like *The Waste Land*, *Annals of the Five Senses*, and *Palimpsest* challenges readers to develop their cognitive flexibility in ways that are similar to reading texts by autists like Romkema, Mukhopadhyay, Lawson, and others. Though these texts and the protagonists they depict may appear at times to be inwardly focused, they demonstrate that such insulation is not possible and push us to reexamine established ways of thinking about both modernism and autism as diagnoses.

¹ This chapter includes material that was previous published in Barber-Stetson, “Slow Processing.”

² Today, modernism has expanded to include representations in non-Western literary cultures; however, the analysis performed here focuses on its manifestation and theorization in the U.S. and UK.

³ The “four suits of the Tarot” are also the four objects in the Grail legends: Sword, Cup, Dish, and Lance.

⁴ Weston quotes these lines: “You asked not of his grief and dread, / So though you live, your bliss is dead.” The knight could have given relief but did not.

⁵ One example that supports North’s argument is the note that characterizes the onomatopoeic “Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop” (Eliot, *TWL* 357) as the song of the hermit thrush (25n357). Critics like Jim McCue have recognized that Frank M. Chapman’s *Birds of Eastern North America* (the text Eliot cites) includes no such description of this bird’s song. Therefore, other interpretations are warranted.

⁶ The song of the nightingale, the bird into which Philomela is transformed, repeatedly appears in the text, language that the listeners are unable to decode (103, 204). This sound provides a link between the second and third sections of the poem. More coded language is presented by Madame Sosostris, a tarot card reader who communicates with one narrator in “The Burial of the Dead.”

⁷ For Tiresias’s role in Greek myth, refer to volume three of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a section of which is provided in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Waste Land* (46).

⁸ As suggested earlier, the annotations may not provide the interpretative assistance that readers expect from authorial notes.

⁹ Based on current gender theory, the center (Tiresias) may be further multiplied with the growing prevalence of trans and intersex as gender identities. This approach risks reading new theories onto old texts because the Greek myth positions two genders as contraries, male and female; however, the continued diversification is important to consider in this context.

¹⁰ This line is an important one, inserted by Vivienne Eliot after reading Eliot's draft of the poem (V. Eliot 14-15).

¹¹ Alan Bold agrees with my relation of *Annals* and these synthetic languages: "With its obsessively subjective concerns, its long catalogues, its allusive technique, the prose in Grieve's *Annals* anticipates the ostentatiously intellectual verse MacDiarmid wrote in the 1930s, in the idiom he called Synthetic English" (Bold 148-9).

¹² MacDiarmid published *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923) in the same year that he proclaimed the beginning of a Scottish Literary Renaissance and the year after he made the critical transition from Christopher Murray Grieve to Hugh MacDiarmid (1922).

¹³ In this section, I choose to refer to the protagonist and narrator (when possible) as separate entities, despite the (very likely) possibility that the narrator is (part of) the protagonist.

¹⁴ "Limelight" could also be argued to be part of the first group given that its narrator also shares similarities with MacDiarmid.

¹⁵ Roderick Watson is the only critic to prominently note this discovery (Introduction xix). The origin of this title suggests that any critical analysis of *Annals* should account for its relation to the Caledonian anti-syzygy and MacDiarmid's use of this concept in later works. In *Scottish Literature*, "Smith tried to define what might be called a national

psychology, or at least national habits of expression, as manifested in Scottish literature over the centuries” (Watson, *The Literature of Scotland* 5).

¹⁶ See his chapter on the Panopticon.

¹⁷ He suggests Robert Burns’s wonderful word “intermingledons” as a synonym (34).

¹⁸ “[T]he Russian Duma might meet in the case of his skull and he would take in the whole ensemble, hear every word spoken, weight up every speaker, discount the particular prejudices of each of his own personalities, educe an aggregate of conviction quite unanimous in its essence and airily at variance in its details—and communicate his impressions to the *Times!*” (9).

¹⁹ McAlmon also wrote a foreword for the text (“Forewarned as regards H D’s Prose”) that was only published with the 1968 re-issuance of the novel.

²⁰ Interestingly, in the original Greek—παλίμψηστος—the focus is on the act of scraping. Writing would have been removed from vellum by scraping or rubbing, but papyrus required washing with water. See Peck.

²¹ Like other critics, Kloefer has argued that *Palimpsest* is a semi-autobiographical text in which each protagonist represents H.D. (572). In her review of the edited edition of *Palimpsest* (1969), Joyce M. Holland describes “Murex” as “the most clearly autobiographical of the three stories in *Palimpsest*” (83).

²² See Thayer, “Browning’s ‘Popularity’ and the Spasmodic Poets,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 54.3 (Jul. 1955): 348-354

²³ Capt. Rafton is the force that threatens to upset Mrs. Fairwood’s precarious balance (252), which she maintains through “sheer nervous force” (261).

²⁴ See also Daniel.

²⁵ *Cocoon* has its etymological roots in the French *coque* (shell), which may indicate that Ransome herself can be read as the murex of the section's title.

²⁶ Mrs. Fairwood is also separated from her environment by a perceived veil: "She couldn't rest there, cold, numbed with that curious texture as of golden cobwebs, slightly cloying, yet totally narcotic, soothing, beatifying about her brain, across her eyes, almost...blurring the substance of the flimsy coat he had in that amateur-of-textures manner, criticized" (315-6). The cobwebs affect her perception much as London does Ransome's. They produce a sense of detachment in these protagonists by mediating their relationship with the external environments. Fairwood compares this mediating cobweb to the lotus introduced earlier by Ransome.

²⁷ As a member of a later generation, Ermy cannot understand Ransome's "predicament" because the War did not affect her in the same way: "Ermy was too smug, too secure, too wrapped in her own importance. What could such things matter? Feet—feet—feet—feet—feet. Their generation should have long ago accepted it" (172).

²⁸ Mrs. Fairwood is also searching for something like a murex: "She wanted to dive deep, deep, courageously down into some unexploited region of the consciousness, into some common deep sea of unrecorded knowledge and bring, triumphant, to the surface some treasure buried, lost, forgotten" (255). Kloefer asks a question that I also had: "What is it, then, the women in *Palimpsest* are looking for?" (571).

²⁹ In a related quotation, Pound called H.D. "that refined, charming and utterly narrow-minded she-bard" in a 1920 letter (qtd. in Reeve 165). Obviously, he serves as an example that narrow-mindedness has its dangers. Pound's narrow-mindedness fostered an anti-Semitism led to his institutionalization at St. Elizabeth's.

Chapter 4

Figures

Figure 1: Spatial representation of a tangent

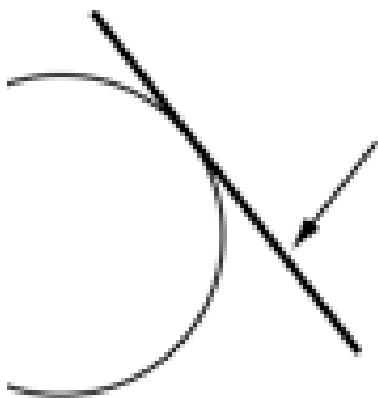


Figure 2: A sample EFT in which “[t]he participant’s task is to find the simple shape within the complex and camouflaging gestalt” (Happé, “Embedded Figures” 1077)

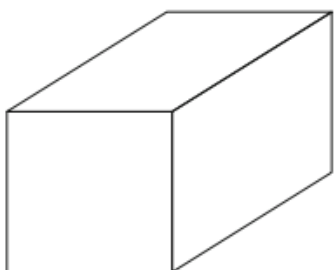
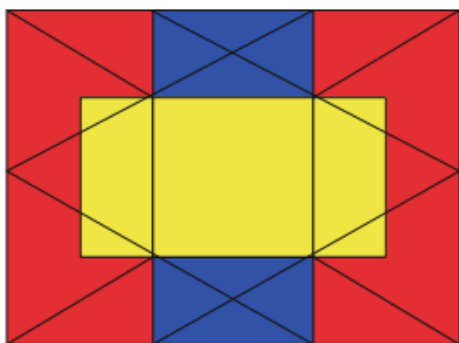
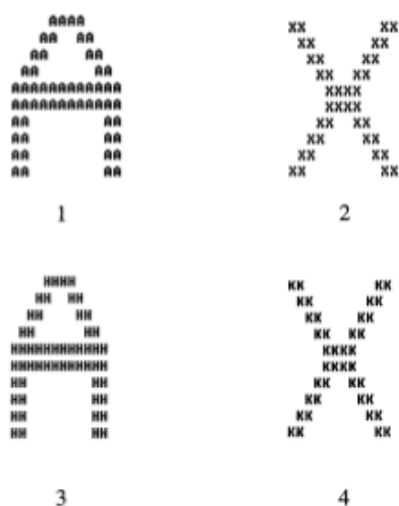
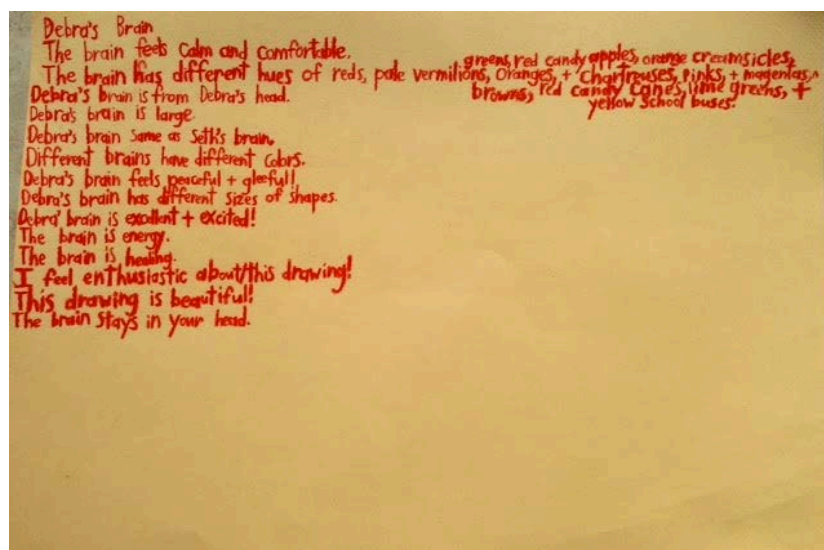


Figure 3: The Navon Task, as employed by Plaisted, Swettenham, and Rees

Figure 4: Chwast's Artist Statement for *Debra's Brain* (Nov. 30, 2013)

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