"Altery and Autism: Mark Haddon's Curious Incident in the Neurological Spectrum"

1. Prime Numbers

Christopher Boone, the fifteen year old autistic narrator and protagonist of Mark Haddon's A Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night, likes prime numbers. Christopher has Asperger's Syndrome and is a mathematical savant, and for him, "prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them." A prime number, of course, is a number that is divisible only by two integers—itseld and one. Thus, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19 and so on are prime numbers, while 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, etc. are not. As Christopher remarks, "prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away" (12).

Haddon's presentation of Christopher's thoughts on prime numbers suggest that they can serve as figures for the autistic subject. Prime numbers do not mix. They are singular, indivisible, unfactorable. Their numbers are small in relation to the total number of integers, and yet there are an infinite number of them. Moreover, they are not alien to the overall number system, but are intrinsic to it. Mathematics could not exist without these singular entities (like inert elements in chemistry) that are only apparent anomalies. A similar understanding has emerged with regard to autism. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, Fourth Edition) emphasizes the isolation experienced by people with Asperger's Disorder, the "impairment in reciprocal social interaction," the degree to which people with Asperger's "lack understanding of the conventions of social interaction" (82). DSM-IV also refers to restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests, while noting that, unlike more severe forms of autism, people diagnosed with Asperger's show normal cognitive and language development. At the same time, however, many writers on autism criticize what they regard as the "categorical approach" of the DSM-IV and speak instead of a "spectrum" of autistic features. There seems at present to be a broad consensus that, as Lorna Wing writes, "autism is not, as Kanner first thought, a unique or separate condition... but is closely related to a range of developmental disorders" (312). Further, this spectrum may not be simply a spectrum linking diagnosable disorders, but one that extends through the whole human population. Temple Grandin, the noted animal scientist and memoirist with Asperger's Syndrome, argues that highly talented people in many fields share certain autistic traits, that "the genes that produce normal people with certain talents are likely to be the same genes that produce the abnormalities found at the extreme end of the same continuum" and "there is no black-and-white dividing line between normal and abnormal (Grandin, 1995, 179, 186). Oliver Sacks describes the extraordinary mimetic powers of the autistic artist Stephen Wiltshire as perhaps a genetic, evolutionary legacy of a part of the human mind that preceded symbolic and linguistic thinking (Sacks, 1995, 240-41), and speaking of Temple Grandin, Sacks describes an even vast er autistic spectrum, "a continuum of experience extending from the animal to the spiritual, from the bovine to the transcendent...which we may call 'primitive' if we wish, but not 'pathological'" ("Forward," in Grandin 1995, 16).
regard autism culturally and how we read Haddon's novel about a teenage boy with Asperger's Syndrome. Since autistic disorders are genetic and neurological, our understandings of these disorders have changed with the rapid expansion of knowledge over the past twenty years in genetics and neurology. The idea of a genetic-neurological spectrum of autism re-emphasizes and transforms Sacks', Grandin's, and other writers' more humanist and spiritual suggestions of links between the autistic and the normal. Recent research in genetics and neurology shows both the almost unimaginable complexity of the physical workings of the mind and also the minuteness of the differences that lead to what seem such different outcomes. Thus, longstanding philosophical and theological concepts of otherness have difficulty when confronted with contemporary neurology. 1 Sacks, for example, searches for alterity and transcendence through his narratives of neurological impairment and finds, rather, that alterity is not "other" at all—that radically different modes of consciousness and perception are parts of ordinary experience that simply are made more visible in moments of neurological impairment. This realization, grounded in genetics and neurology, makes more clear as well how the devastations of neurological disorders such as autism can be linked to enhanced powers of memory, organization, and expression. If the mind is physical, biological, and stands in close evolutionary relation to the minds and neurological systems of animals, then we need not think of any mental process, product, or relation in terms of alterity or transcendence—unless we conclude that the mind contains and produces its own alterities and that the experience of otherness is not just a phenomenological, but a neurological reality, and so, in every sense, is not other at all. 2

Haddon's portrayal of Christopher falls within these clinical, neurological, philosophical, and popular frames. Haddon shows in great detail Christopher's difficulties in social interactions. His manner with others is wooden; he cannot stand to be touched and sometimes screams when someone touches him. He tells us that he feels more comfortable with animals than with people. His condition makes even his family relationships difficult, and the novel provides suggestions that Christopher's autism was a cause of the failure of his parents' marriage. Christopher is extremely orderly: he must know at all times exactly what time it is; he knows precisely the contents of his pockets; he enjoys maps, diagrams, and lists. He is, in addition, extremely gifted in mathematics; though he is only fifteen, he is preparing to take the A-level exams in math, which lead to university entrance in England. All these features can be found in the clinical and popular literature on autism and Asperger's. Perhaps most significant, and encompassing these other traits, Christopher has enormous difficulty deciphering what other people are thinking or feeling. He cannot read body language or facial expressions. Christopher relates how his teacher showed him simple sketches of faces bearing schematic expressions, and that while he could interpret the basic "happy" and "sad" faces, any further complexity baffled him. As some writers on autism/Asperger's have put it, Christopher lacks a "theory of mind" and so has difficulty conceiving that others have real feelings and perceptions that may differ from his. 3

Haddon, who has experience working with autistic people and clearly is familiar with some of the clinical and popular literature, has created a character who, unlike modernist and postmodern antecedents, exhibits a clinically distinct neurological impairment rather than a more vague conceptual alterity. I am not arguing, of course, that this form of representation is an advance over the earlier ones, but it is certainly different and must be approached in different terms—in particular, with more attention to its clinical and scientific models. At the same time, Christopher is not simply a "case" in this novel. He is both the protagonist and narrator, and so Haddon is engaged here in imagining an Asperger's language, consciousness, and literary style.

2. Asperger's and Narrative

Christopher strives for an absolute literality in language. He cannot understand, and so tries always to avoid, metaphors, jokes, and lies. When his mother compliments him as a good boy because he is so honest, he tells us that he is not honest because he is good, but because "I can't tell lies" (19): that is, he is cognitively incapable of lying. As he says earlier, explaining why the narrative he is writing must be nonfiction, "I find it hard to imagine things that did not happen to me" (4). Metaphors and jokes are incomprehensible to him because, like facial expressions, they have multiple meanings. For this reason, he dislikes his own
name which, as he tells us, is a metaphor: to carry Christ, or the bearer of Christ. Christopher does not want a name that means something else, he says: “I want my name to mean me” (15). Every case of figurative—that is, counterfactual-language seems to lead to more cases, unceasingly, leaving Christopher with a sense of cognitive vertigo, “shaky and scared,” and this is why he dislikes “proper novels” (19). On the couple of occasions in the narrative when Christopher does employ a figure of speech, he quickly informs us that he has used a simile and not a metaphor.

Thus, when he writes that a policeman’s hairy nose “looked as if there were two very small mice hiding in his nostrils” (17), he assures us that this is literally true, that this is indeed what the man’s nose looked like. Similes can be true, while metaphors—and jokes and novels—are always lies. 4

Language, as Christopher perceives, threatens always to veer out of control. Even when referents are particular, the signs for them must always be general, and so the name can never mean only the thing—as Kenneth Burke put it, the thing is the sign for the word rather than the other way round. The world, for Christopher, is a world of things, and there are so many of them but so few words relative to the number of things. How then can language be an adequate organizer of reality? Christopher prefers the map, the diagram, the algorithm, for these represent the world in ways that slippery words cannot. These forms are stable; they are pictures of a particular moment of reality. Words are of a different order that, evidently, refers in large part only to itself, and clearly is in league with the impossible, shifting meanings of human faces and with a social world whose most prominent traits are concealment and untruth.

Christopher objects to language per se insofar as it is figurative and thus false, or at least ambiguous. It is inadequate as a tool to organize the world as he perceives it, and in this conclusion Christopher joins Temple Grandin, one of whose chief themes is the predominance in autistic people of visual over verbal thinking. 5 He objects also to narrative, which we know as the most characteristic mode of organizing and giving meaning to human experience and action over time. Time is a topic that preoccupies and troubles Christopher. The problem with time, he tells us, is that it is the universal mechanism of change and unknowability. “Time is not like space” in which positions and relationships remain constant. One can construct a physical or mental map of an area of space which will be a true representation, and if “you put something down somewhere, like a protractor or a biscuit,” the object will not change its position on its own, and your map will remind you of its position and its relation to other objects (156). With an adequate map, you can always find yourself in space.

Time, however, cannot be mapped in this way, for a great part of its terrain—the future—cannot be known, at least not in its most important features. To become lost in time, then, is a real possibility for Christopher. This anxiety explains Christopher's preoccupation with always knowing exactly what time it is, and his obsessions about personal daily schedules and railway timetables. “This is why I like timetables,” Christopher explains, “because they make sure you don't get lost in time” (158). And yet, the timetable or the schedule is not like a map of space, for it does not represent an actual, current reality, but is more like a preliminary sketch of states of affairs that may or may not ultimately come to pass. And Christopher, as an outstanding student of modern physics, is aware as well that mapping relationships in time depends on the position and relative speed of the observer, and therefore, “because nothing can travel faster than the speed of light, this means that we can only know about a fraction of the things that go on in the universe”; and Christopher provides a helpful diagram to illustrate his point (157).

But why not narrative, for narrative is precisely the mode of knowledge that, in general, situates the human subject in time? And Christopher is, after all, whether he likes it or not, engaged in composing the narrative that is the text of this novel. Christopher, however, makes clear that in composing this narrative, he is not writing “a proper novel,” but rather a mystery novel, which in his view is quite different. A mystery novel is a puzzle, and resembles more an algorithm than it does a chronological narrative encrusted in figurative language. A neighbor's dog has been murdered. Christopher himself came upon the dog's body. Having located the body in space, it remains for him to locate the murderer and place murderer and victim in a mappable spatial relation. A mystery, for Christopher, exists to be solved, for the crime has already been committed and its effects have been discovered. All that remains is the missing piece of a contemporaneous spatial puzzle, to which temporal narrative may be of assistance but is not essential.
Christopher's idea of the mystery novel differs significantly, and obviously, from most contemporary narrative theory. For Gary Saul Morson, the essential quality of narrative lies in its emphasis on the unknowable possibilities inherent in any present moment, and thus the contingency of all events. An actor may do one thing, or he may do another, and there is no law of narrative physics or chemistry that finally will determine his act. Time, Morson argues, must be "open" in order for a moment fully to be present, and for it to have significance, and so "for a present moment to matter, to have real weight, more than one thing must be possible at the next moment... In open time, at least one thing that did not happen could have" (62). Time's motion, insofar as it enters narrative, is not mechanical: it requires consciousness and willed interventions, and "now is not just yesterday plus one unit of time" (64). The world that is described by narrative is not a puzzle that lacks a single piece, or an algorithm all of whose variables will ultimately be identified. Contingency is at the center of human conscious experience, and narrative, in Morson's view, is the most accurate depiction human beings have devised for portraying and analyzing it. "One needs story," Morson concludes, "because the world is imperfect. One needs story because there is no goal. And one needs story because things do not fit" (66).

Christopher would share Morson's premise—that narrative is the verbal expression of the contingency of human actions and relations in time—but would reject his conclusion that this expression represents a form of knowledge that is both true and edifying, and that it should be embraced. Christopher wishes for a form of knowledge and expression that is spatial, not temporal; and that therefore can be certain, not contingent.

Christopher's attitudes toward language and narrative appear to place him in the tradition of longing for a perfect, Adamic, Cratyllic, pre-Babel, pre-Saussurean language of pure correspondence in which signifier, signified, and referent are merged, and all slippage and ambiguity are banished. Christopher lives, or would like to live, in a world of physical objects located in space, in a present that does not change significantly from moment to moment. It would be a world routine and habit; of problems or puzzles that need to be solved, but not of personal growth or of life-changing decisions. This world, I would argue, resembles the world of conscious but non-linguistic mammals as described by evolutionary neurologists like Terrence Deacon, Richard Edelman, and Antonio Damasio.

3. Evolutionary Neurology, Spectrums of Consciousness, and Language

For Damasio, consciousness is an evolutionary adaptation that arose in mammals along with their more complex nervous systems, and that allows for a homeostatic regulation of inner life along with the creation of mental images of the external world. Consciousness in its most basic form, Damasio argues, is "the feeling of what happens when we see or hear or touch" (26). It is a form of knowledge, but is fundamentally kinesthetic (or, to use Oliver Sacks' term, proprioceptive) rather than linguistic. Consciousness is a highly effective means for an organism to locate itself in the world, to monitor its feelings-which, for Damasio, are crucial indices of its condition and thus of great adaptive importance-and to make choices and act in the world. Core consciousness, as Damasio calls it, does not require language. It is a physical-emotional condition of being in the world, and being distinct from the world. This core consciousness is, for Damasio, the fundamental mode of existence for mammals, and it requires considerably more neural complexity than that possessed by other vertebrates (except perhaps some birds). Linguistic, or as Damasio calls it, extended consciousness arises in human beings out of, and in addition to, the kinesthetic core consciousness that is shared with all mammals and does not disappear in humans. The development of language, accompanied by evolutionary advances in brain function that permit greater long-term memory, allows for the creation of an autobiographical self that exists across time as the basic core consciousness does not.

Richard Edelman shares Damasio's conclusion that there are two types of consciousness, which he calls primary and higher order. As with Damasio's categories, Edelman's primary consciousness functions without language and provides a way to integrate inner states, short term memory, and the animal's current relation to the world. Higher order consciousness evolved together with the development of language through a process Edelman calls "semantic bootstrapping" in which newly adaptive "phonological and lexical systems" made use of the "already existing conceptual systems" of primary consciousness (175). Thus, the
earlier form of consciousness formed the basis for the newer form, and was never abandoned. Edelman explicitly discusses forms of consciousness in their relations to temporality. For Edelman, the human achievement of higher order, linguistic consciousness is unequivocally a temporal liberation. Animals possessing only primary consciousness are "bound to the small time intervals mediated by short term memory; they have no concept of the past" (245), and this form of consciousness is "still largely dependent upon the succession of events in real time" (103). Longer term memory and the concomitant emergence of language, Edelman argues, "provide means of freeing animal behavior from the tyranny of ongoing events" (92). The ability to represent oneself in time, to distinguish past from present is "the essential element in freeing an animal from slavery to present time and its 'neural image'" (187). Thus, Edelman has articulated what might also be called narrative consciousness.

Damasio's and Edelman's arguments and neurological evidence that nonlinguistic, non-narrative, kinesthetic, and object-oriented consciousness exists in animals and continues to function in human beings (along with linguistic, narrative, temporal-historical consciousness) assist in our reading of Haddon's depiction of Christopher. Christopher's flat verbal style and his favoring of diagrams and algorithms over narrative as modes of organizing reality suggest a tension revealed through his autism between a nonlinguistic (core or primary) and a linguistic (extended or higher order) consciousness. In most people, this tension is muffled, resolved decisively in favor of language; the autistic subject, as Haddon presents him, brings this evolutionary tension powerfully to the foreground once more. Through Christopher's narrative which claims to disdain narrative in favor of problem-solving, Haddon allows reader to glimpse, though only in part, a consciousness in which language and temporality are not the main components.

Terrence Deacon provides a linguistically more complex account of the neurological evolution from nonlinguistic to linguistic consciousness. Deacon adapts Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs, which divides signs into three categories: icon, index, and symbol. An icon, as Peirce defines it, is a sign that stands for itself, or that is the thing it represents. The icon exists "such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else" (Peirce, 383) and is determined "by virtue of its own internal nature" (Peirce, 391). A mathematical diagram whose logic and references all are internal would, for Peirce, be an icon. The icon of a deity is understood by a believer not to represent, but to be, directly to present, the deity. For Deacon, any animal, however primitive its nervous system, must have iconic recognition. It must be able to recognize a thing as itself: an object as an object, a color as a color, food as food, a predator as a predator. Iconic recognition is, Deacon writes, the "default position" of consciousness (76), "the base on which all other forms of representation are built... the bottom of the interpretive hierarchy" (77). The index, in Peirce's thinking, is a sign that points to an object or to another sign. A proper name is an index, as is a symptom of a disease (Peirce, 391). A flash of lightning would be an index of an atmospheric condition; smoke might be an index of fire. While with an icon, there is an identity between sign and thing and thus no need for interpretation, an index relies on contiguity or causation: as Deacon explains, there must be a physical association between the indexical sign and its referent (82). Deacon cites as an example in animal behavior the cries of vervet monkeys, in which a particular utterance indicates the approach of a particular predator (leopard, snake, or eagle). Such indexical reference, Deacon argues, is not language proper because it is based on a "necessary association"; the vervet cries "rely on a relatively stable correlation with what they refer, in order to refer" (67). Genuine linguistic, or symbolic, reference, conversely, is not based on direct association or contiguity, but on more general, systemic relationships. For Peirce, use of the symbol requires always a third term—not just sign and referent, but also an "interpretant," a sign that governs the interpretation of the relation between sign and referent, and subsequently itself requires an interpretant to facilitate its own interpretation. Thus, the use of symbols, in Peirce's view, can only be understood in the context of a semantic universe of symbols, each requiring the others to achieve its meaning. Deacon, echoing Peirce, asserts that the relation between symbol and object relies on the "complex function of the relation the symbol has to other symbols" rather than simply to the object to which it refers (83).

For Deacon, all animals with relatively complex nervous systems, certainly all mammals, are capable of indexical thinking. They can see objects not simply as themselves but can see one in relation to another. A dog or cat knows the meaning
of the sound of a can being opened, for the sound is consistently followed by a meal.

Indexical thinking, Deacon observes, is an enormously effective evolutionary adaptation. For every animal but ourselves, it has served admirably, and for our human-primate ancestors it was the only form of thinking until only about two million years ago. The evolution of human language, Deacon argues, is in essence the shift from indexical to symbolic thinking, a gradual "restructuring event" in which, over the course of nearly two million years (our current linguistic abilities were achieved between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago) "we let go of one associative strategy and grabbed hold of another, higher-order one..." (93).

According to Deacon, human symbolic abilities and human neurology-language and the brain--evolved together, in reciprocal relation with each other. In a process Deacon calls "co-evolution," an "evolutionary dynamic between social and biological processes" (348), the earliest symbolic behaviors made use, though with great difficulty, of existing brain physiology. When these behaviors proved to have value, the features of the brain that facilitated them were selected for in subsequent generations. Refinements in brain physiology made possible more effective symbolic behaviors, which, in turn, led to further adaptations in the brain (as well as changes in the physiology and position of the larynx), and thus still more effective uses of symbols. Regarding the origins of the enormous frontal area of the human brain that most distinguishes us from other primates, Deacon argues that "symbolic reference itself is the only conceivable selection pressure for such an extensive and otherwise counterproductive shift in learning emphasis. Symbol use itself must have been the prime mover for the prefrontalization of the brain in hominid evolution.

Language has given rise to a brain which is strongly biased to employ the one mode of associative learning that is most critical to it" (336). Human beings are, Deacon concludes, "incarnations, so to speak, of the processes of using words" (322).

This process of reincarnation in which hominid species shifted from indexical to symbolic thinking was lengthy and difficult for, as all the animals around us demonstrate, indexical, associative, thinking is quite effective. Moreover, as Deacon argues, the two types of thinking are in certain ways incompatible. In order to learn how to use symbols—that is, how to work with signs whose meanings are general, abstract, unstable, and dependent on a system of signs—the use of indices, with their invariable, associative meanings, must be unlearned or suppressed. While symbolic thinking depends on indexical thinking for its most fundamental sense of reference (as pointing toward, or immediate association of one thing with another; just as indexical thinking depends on iconic perception for its ability to identify a thing as such), as we think in symbols and use the conceptual flights and shortcuts that symbols provide, we must forget the potential infinitude of one-to-one concrete correspondences in which (living in a world of language) we would drown were our thinking to remain indexical.

This potential drowning in indices seems to describe life with autism. Deacon refers to autism as an instance of genetic damage to symbol-using capacities, citing the often extraordinary abilities of people on the autistic spectrum for memory, mathematical calculation, and mimesis, and their difficulties in matters of social and linguistic interpretation. Deacon notes that while people marvel at these "savant" skills, non-autistic people, without realizing it, are themselves savants and prodigies at language, miraculously acquiring entire languages as children in just a few years, and thereafter, like autistic savants, applying "our one favored cognitive style to everything" (416). People on the autistic spectrum are, for Deacon, people whose thinking is more indexical and less symbolic.

The work of contemporary evolutionary neurologists like Damasio, Edelman, and Deacon tells us that human beings are hominids who share most of our brain physiology with our primate ancestors, and that we have been fully linguistic beings for only one or two hundred thousand years out of tens of millions of years of primate evolution. Our linguistic-symbolic capacities—and the "extended" or autobiographical consciousness and sense of self that accompany these capacities—partly supplant and partly coexist with far older and more extensive nonlinguistic modes of apprehension, consciousness, and cognition. Human beings occupy the farthest point at the end of a neurological-evolutionary spectrum, and are by no means removed from that spectrum. In this context, instances of neurological impairment, whether congenital or acquired through injury, may help illustrate other points on the spectrum. Given, then, this spectrum of symbolic abilities that extends
both through human evolution and also through the modern human genome and current human population, it becomes difficult to speak of an absolute "other" of language in any terms except those of theology. At the same time, it is difficult to speak of language as an all-encompassing totality determining human consciousness and social life. The human situation with respect to language, at least as seen through the perspective provided by evolutionary neurology, is neither that language and linguistically-related social conventions are everything; nor that there is language and some "other" of language. The shift into symbolic-linguistic consciousness and thinking, for a species or an individual, is a qualitatively distinct event, but the nonlinguistic, "core," indexical modes of thought and consciousness exist along a spectrum of thought and consciousness that the human species and its members retain. These are biological, neurological bases of human life, not inscrutable points of transcendent alterity.

The human shift into language, then, is not a Fall. In Deacon's view, it is an adaptation to the more complex social structures that took shape in hominid groups over two million years ago with the advent of hunting and the need to preserve monogamous pair-bonds when males and females spent much of their time in separate occupations. Deacon speculates that ritual tokens and actions that conveyed shared group recognition of specific pair-bonds constituted the earliest symbols, and so the first symbolic behavior was, in effect, a wedding. The symbolic object, sound, or action represented not the man and woman together at that moment (which would be an indexical association), but the concept both of their relationship and of all relationships of the same kind. Thus, for Deacon, at the foundation of language use is the desire to construct social, and especially family, cohesion.

Anxieties regarding social and familial disintegration stand at the center of Haddon's novel as well. The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night portrays a teenager with Asperger's Syndrome, shows his difficulties responding and behaving appropriately in the social-linguistic world (difficulties that readers may recognize from clinical and popular writings on Asperger's and autism), and introduces, through Christopher's narration, questions on the nature of language and narrative. But this novel is more than a fictional case study or a contribution to literary theory. It has a plot and a genre, and in order to understand this book more thoroughly, it is necessary to explore how its view of autism and its thinking about language intersect with its generic status as a detective novel.

4. The Asperger's Detective, Genre, and "Social Autism"

As the novel opens, Christopher goes for a walk at night and discovers that a neighbor's dog, a poodle named Wellington, has been murdered, stabbed with a garden fork. Christopher had been fond of the dog, and so decides he will find out who killed him. The novel is Christopher's narrative of his search, which he regards explicitly as falling in the category of mystery novel, with the added feature that his novel is true, because he has trouble imagining things that didn't happen. Christopher's parents are separated, partly because of considerable differences in personality and partly because of the strain of raising Christopher. Sometime before their separation, Christopher's mother had begun an affair with the neighbor who owned Wellington, and eventually she and Roger Shears move to London together. As consolation or revenge, Christopher's father has an affair with Roger's wife, Eileen, but that affair goes badly and they break it off. As Christopher works on the case of the murdered dog, and on his novel, his father tells him to mind his own business and stop the detective work, but Christopher disobeys him and perseveres. Christopher, as we learn, knows nothing at all about the complicated relations between the two families. When his mother left, his father told Christopher that she had died. He learns that his father had lied to him when he discovers a collection of letters from his mother hidden in a shoebox in his father's bedroom. His father then confesses that he himself killed Wellington out of anger about the failure of his relationship with Eileen Shears. Thus, the mystery is solved, but Christopher's personal problems have increased. Now afraid of his father, he runs away to London to find his mother which, after several adventures on the British rail system, he is able to do. Christopher, at this point, is embroiled no longer in a murder mystery but in the emotional turmoils of family life. The novel ends with Christopher passing his A-level exams in math, reunited with his mother, and very slowly beginning to be reconciled with his father, who gives him a dog as a gesture of trust and good will.
As a person with Asperger's Syndrome, Christopher makes an excellent detective. He notices things. When a teacher compliments him on being clever, Christopher replies that he is merely "observant" (25). His powers of observation, moreover, rely on precise memories of things in their places: it is associative, indexical, and so it is made far more difficult by social interaction. As he says, "when I am in a new place and there are lots of people there it is even harder because people are not like cows and flowers and grass and they can talk to you and do things that you don't expect, so you have to notice everything that is in the place, and also you have to notice things that might happen as well" (143). His indexical mode of thinking is confused and threatened when it enters a world of symbolic action, and yet his observant, associative mind gives him advantages in activities that require logical thinking within strict regulations. "That is why I am good at chess and maths and logic," Christopher explains, "because most people are almost blind and they don't see most things and there is lots of spare capacity in their heads and it is filled with things which aren't connected and are silly, like I'm worried that I might have left the gas cooker on" (144). Christopher's Asperger's mind focuses on a particular task to the exclusion of all others, notices all that is relevant to that task, but is overwhelmed if faced with too much information on other matters. Christopher surely would have noticed at once Poe's purloined letter sitting openly on the table.

Given this status as a person with Asperger's Syndrome, who suffers from certain neurological-symbolic-social impairments but possesses at the same time corresponding neurological-perceptual-logical enhancements, Christopher as a literary character exhibits far more agency and autonomy than the neurologically impaired characters of modernist fiction. Neither Faulkner's Benjy, Conrad's Stevie (in The Secret Agent), Djuna Barnes's Robin (in Nightwood), DeLillo's Wilder, nor Jerzy Kosinski's Chance (in Being There) could make the decisions or perform the actions that Christopher does. Haddon's construction of Christopher's subjectivity and agency is partly a product of Haddon's understanding of contemporary neurological and clinical models of autism and Asperger's. As in a Sacks case history, Christopher's combination of impairments and enhancements help reveal his full humanity. At the same time, they drive the plot of the novel, allowing Christopher to succeed as a brilliantly perceptive detective as he simultaneously is blind to the most obvious social clues as to the reality of his family situation.

Christopher's autonomy and agency thus have an additional source in the novel. While they are products of contemporary understandings of Asperger's Syndrome, they also are linked to-in fact, are functions of-his status as detective.

Christopher models himself on Sherlock Holmes, a character in whom he sees strong resemblances to himself, both in his powers of observation and, quoting Conan Doyle, in "the power of detaching his mind at will" (Haddon, 73). Several writers on autism have remarked on the quasi-autistic qualities of Holmes' investigative style, and, in fact, many classic and hard boiled fictional detectives share these features of acute observation, focused and logical thinking, and social isolation that characterize Christopher and that clinical and popular writers have attributed to those on the autistic/Asperger's spectrum. The detective is "an outsider socially and an eccentric psychologically," writes Richard Alewyn (Alewyn, 71). He has, in Steven Marcus's view, no personal life "apart from his work... Being a detective is the realization of an identity, for there are components in it which are beyond or beneath society-and cannot be touched by it-and beyond and beneath reason" (Marcus, 206-7). But these same traits that isolate the detective are the traits that enable him to see and think more clearly. And only in his isolation can the detective preserve the social order.

Preserving, maintaining, healing the social order ultimately is the detective's goal, and the detective genre expresses anxieties regarding social disorder and disease. The crime, in particular the corpse itself, is a rip in the social fabric, and a revelation of a hidden reality of corruption. The camera's slow entry into the severed ear near the start of David Lynch's Blue Velvet is a figure for the logic of the detective genre. Through a traumatic dismemberment, the genre directs us into a subterranean world in which the crime is revealed as not an aberration but a symptom of a more pervasive criminality and a threat to future stability. The detective genre at least gestures toward social critique. In some cases, the critique is limited and quickly disavowed. What may have seemed a wider threat is really the work of a single and uniquely perverted mind; when the criminal is apprehended, the threat vanishes and stability is ensured. The classic "whodonits" of the Agatha Christie branch of the
genre exemplify this tendency toward ideological containment with its assurance that in the end nothing is seriously wrong with the social order. Conversely, the “hard-boiled” fictions of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Chester Himes, and others are very much concerned with revealing the symptomatic status of violent crime, and the pervasive, systemic nature of political and social corruption. (Conan Doyle is an ambiguous figure on this spectrum. Many of his stories indicate that crimes point toward deeper conspiracies of crime and are genuine threats to social order, yet in general the solving of crimes and punishment of criminals is sufficient to contain these threats).

What social dysfunctions, then, are revealed, critiqued, or contained through Christopher’s investigation with its Asperger’s methodology? The body of the dog in Curious Incident provokes first a narrow question that can be investigated as a sort of puzzle: simply, who killed the dog? This is, as it stands, an isolated “whodonit” question, amenable to the detached, indexical thinking at which Christopher excels. It soon opens up, however, as in hard-boiled or noir versions, into questions and problems that are deeply embedded in the social-symbolic relationships of Christopher’s life—that is, into the areas where he is most impaired. The greatest mysteries that Christopher explores are those of human emotions and social relations.

Christopher, as a person with Asperger’s, finds communication and social relations difficult. Likewise, as a detective, the literary descendent of Holmes, Poirot, Spade, and Marlowe, he is a social outsider, with eccentric modes of thought and expression. Thus, Haddon constructs his character so that a neurological condition overlaps with characterological conditions of genre. The fictional detective, now located on the autistic spectrum and so doubly outside normative social-symbolic relations, must investigate a crime which stands as symptom of a rupture in a social order that he is only marginally part of and is neurologically unequipped to understand.

What Christopher discovers however—or, more accurately, what we as readers discover through Christopher’s investigation—is that the social order is itself firmly placed on the autistic spectrum. That is, the society that Christopher has lived in all his life, but now gradually comes to uncover with more care is characterized by its members’ isolation and inability to communicate with each other. He finds this first in his family. His mother is frustrated to the point of despair by her inability to have a normal maternal relationship with Christopher, and her marriage suffers, especially because her husband often blames her for her problems with their son. She leaves with another man, but from what we see in the novel, this relationship also does not seem especially close. Christopher’s father embarks on a failed relationship with Mrs. Shears, and their emotional and communicative impasse leads to the murder of the dog. Christopher’s father seems a solitary, brooding man given to violent outbursts. His strategy for explaining his separation from his wife to Christopher is to end her existence as a member of the family by telling Christopher she is dead.

The novel’s depiction of social isolation extends beyond the family. As Christopher walks through in his neighborhood, knocking on doors and interviewing neighbors about the dog’s murder, we find that the neighbors barely know each other. The first person Christopher talks to wears a T-shirt that thematizes a lack of social connection: “Beer-Helping Ugly People Have Sex For Over 2,000 Years.” Christopher asks him, “Do you know who killed Wellington?”

I did not look at his face. I do not like looking at people’s faces, especially if they are strangers. He did not say anything for a few seconds.

Then he said, “Who are you?”

I said, “I’m Christopher Boone from number 36 and I know you. You’re Mr. Thompson.”

He said, “I’m Mr. Thompson’s brother.”

I said, “Do you know who killed Wellington?”

He said, “Who the fuck is Wellington?” (36).

Christopher has better luck with his two succeeding interviews. One woman, whose
name he doesn't know, greets him, "'It's Christopher, isn't it?'" (36); and the next, whom he knows as Mrs. Alexander, says, "You're Christopher, aren't you?" (39). These neighbors know who he is—he's the kid down the street with some kind of disability—but clearly they've never spoken to him. As Christopher tells Mrs. Alexander, "I don't like talking to strangers," but as we see through the failures of communication that these interviews present, no one in the neighborhood likes talking to strangers much, and everyone is more or less a stranger to each other. And yet, the people are not unfriendly to Christopher, and they try to be helpful. The unnamed woman warns Christopher, "You be careful, young man," the man with the unusual T-shirt asks, "Look son, do you really think you should be going around asking questions like this," and Mrs. Alexander appears to want to engage Christopher in conversation and goes inside to prepare a soft drink and cookies for him though he leaves before she returns. There seems to be a desire for connection that is in conflict with a broader inhibition, and this broader inhibition, while not explained explicitly, appears to arise from social and economic factors.

Christopher's family and his neighbors are working class. His father runs a small home heating repair service with his one employee, and his mother is a secretary who cannot spell very well (as we see from her letters to Christopher) and who is only able to work at temporary jobs. The city where they live, Swindon, lies seventy miles west of London and has a population of about 180,000, with significant south Asian and Caribbean communities. According to its Borough Council website, while its traditional manufacturing sector has declined, Swindon has developed thriving mid- and high-tech industries. Unemployment, however, has risen since the late 1990s, and the site expressed concern that long term unemployment, in particular, had increased and that the Swindon workforce was less qualified for high-tech work than workers in comparable localities. Housing is also a problem in Swindon. There were in 2003 1,600 abandoned houses in Swindon while eight hundred households live in temporary housing provided by the city (either in public facilities or in private facilities contracted by the city). A special report on homelessness prepared for the Borough Council in 2003 reported that the city had accepted three hundred homeless households for rehousing in that year, and that nine hundred other "non-priority" households (either single people or childless couples) could not be assisted by the city. The report estimated that the shortfall in affordable housing was 1,218 units in 2003 (Swindon Borough Council Review of Homelessness Services , 16).

Swindon and its inhabitants, both in reality and in Jonathan Haddon's fictional representation, occupy a post-Thatcher England characterized by vibrant high-tech industries coexisting with declining social services and education, and rising unemployment and homelessness. It seems characterized also by a lack of social networks and civic, community, and class organizations of the sort that E.P. Thompson described as helping to form the basis of a distinct working class culture in England from the 18 th through the mid-20 th centuries. Nor do we see any evidence of extended families; the small detached houses of Swindon are inhabited only by nuclear families, or fragments of them. This is a social world that, for reasons Haddon does not investigate, has been flattened, atomized, with each household an isolated and fragile entity.

By means of Christopher's role as detective (a generic role strongly marked by autistic qualities), Haddon depicts a pervasive social autism. The administrative bureaucracy of this society is not malign; Christopher as detective does not uncover the sorts of corruption and police violence found by the hard boiled detectives, Sam Spade and Phillip Marlowe, or even, to a lesser degree by his model Sherlock Holmes. The police, in fact, are always patient, helpful, and reasonable in Curious Incident . But the police and the contracting welfare state can do nothing to address the weakening of social and family bonds that Christopher's investigation reveals. At the same time, however, although Christopher can be read as a figure for a broader social autism, this novel is not primarily a work of social or political critique. Its political points are not developed, and the extended metaphor of a social autism is offered but then withdrawn. The novel's focus returns, at last, to the family, to human emotion, and to difficulties in personal relationships that appear to go beyond or beneath any particular social structures. In spite of his apparent critique of a specifically post-Thatcher social fragmentation, Haddon's deeper explanation of social dysfunction seems to rely more on neurology and notions of the autistic spectrum than on politics. In this reading, Christopher, as a person with Asperger's, is not a trope for a social autism that has political or economic causes; rather, the
Christopher--with his resistance to symbolic thinking and ambiguity, his abhorrence of being touched, his difficulties in understanding others' thoughts and feelings—is an extreme example of qualities possessed in lesser amounts by everyone.

5. "...a loud wailing noise, like an animal on a nature program..."

Christopher acknowledges that he has trouble with what philosophers and, more recently, writers on autism call "theory of mind"—that is, the ability to conceive of other people possessing separate minds and to imagine what they might be thinking or feeling. Christopher remembers his teacher telling his parents that he would always find this skill very difficult, but Christopher redefines his limitation as a puzzle—that is, as his cognitive mentor, Holmes, might see it. "If something is a puzzle," Christopher tells us, "there is always a way of solving it" (116). Christopher's solution to the puzzle of other minds, however, consists of regarding other minds as he regards his own. People's minds, he concludes, are like computers, and consciousness is a picture on a screen—without, he cautions us, any subject of consciousness there to watch it. What we may regard as the subject watching the screen is merely another picture. Even emotion, for Christopher, does not distinguish human consciousness from computer cognition. "Feelings are just having a picture on the screen in your head....and if it is a happy picture [you] smile and if it is a sad picture [you] cry" (119).

But, significantly, Christopher provides these thoughts on theory of mind just after the most intense emotional and linguistic event in the novel to that point—his discovery and reading of the letters from his mother that his father had hidden from him. In these letters we witness for the first time a voice, a mind, unmediated by Christopher's consciousness, and the mother's voice breaks the novel apart. These letters show an extreme instance of another cognitive and emotional mode of being, and Christopher's Holmesian, Asperger's puzzle-solving method of apprehending this other mind proves to be inadequate.

Christopher's mother's letters are extraordinary. Their sudden shift in voice and sensibility brings to the novel the complexity of adult emotions, and social and sexual relations. These letters stand clearly in contrast both to the autistic tone and sensibility of Christopher's narration and to the broader social autism that the novel portrays. Simultaneously chatty and emotionally intense, the letters tell Christopher of the deterioration of her marriage and her decision to leave the home. His mother relates her frequent losses of temper as she reaches "the end of my tether" (107) or having "lost my rag" (108) at some action of Christopher or her husband. She "cried and cried and cried" after one incident, and her decision to leave "broke my heart" (109). She tells of household violence, of hitting her husband and of throwing food during a failed attempt to get Christopher to eat, and of her sorrow over these actions: "...and he told me I was being stupid and said I should pull myself together and I hit him, which was wrong, but I was so upset" (107).

Christopher, however, cannot understand these emotions. He responds physically. "It was as if the room was swinging from side to side, as if it was at the top of a really tall building and the building was swinging backward and forward in a strong wind..." (112). And this vertigo is the same feeling he described earlier when he wrote about his physical reaction to false statements. Thinking of things that aren't true, he wrote, "makes me feel shaky and scared, like I do when I'm standing on the top of a very tall building..." (19). Apparently, his pain results from a terrible cognitive disruption: his mother is not dead; his father lied to him. The stability of clear, unambiguous signification has been lost, blown away by the winds of an emotional life that is steeped in, and can only be expressed in the dangerous ambiguities of language. Christopher's difficulties in constructing a theory of mind with regard to other people--his difficulty imagining their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings—is, as Haddon portrays it, entirely of a piece with his difficult relation to language.

The emotional climax of the novel, however, is a moment of linguistic breakdown on the part of Christopher's mother—her reaction to the news that her husband had told Christopher that she was dead.

And then Mother said, "Oh my God."
And then she didn’t say anything for a long while. And then she made a loud wailing noise like an animal on a nature program on television.

And I didn't like her doing this because it was a loud noise, and I said, "Why are you doing that?" (193).

Christopher's mother's response is non-linguistic and non-symbolic; an immediate outburst of feeling. It could be called "indexical," in that it points toward or bears a causal relation to an emotion although it does not, in any general, symbolic sense, represent the emotion. As Christopher notes, it links her to animals. In literary terms, her wailing places her in the lineage of Faulkner's Benjy and DeLillo's Wilder, whose emotional cries reinforce their separation from the symbolic realm. But in this case, the non-linguistic outburst is uttered by the character in this novel most thoroughly immersed in language use, whose letters, as we have seen, serve as counterpoint to Christopher's hostility to the resources and perspectives of language.

Unlike Benjy or Wilder, Christopher's mother is not some "other," outside the loop of language. She is both a competent, indeed enthusiastic, user of language and a person capable of emotional loss of language that connects her with animal behavior—and also to her son, who is prone to screaming tantrums. Haddon's imagining of Christopher's mother's "loud wailing noise" as an emotional center for the novel indicates powerfully that, for Haddon, all symbolic and emotional activity falls on a broad spectrum of neurological response, with no clear break between the linguistic and non-linguistic. And the mother's wailing, we should note, is in response to a quintessential symbolic act: the father's lie, his denial of her existence.

And yet, Christopher cannot understand his mother's wailing. He regards it in terms of animal behavior, does not see it as similar to his own emotional outbursts, and, sadly, rejects the emotional connection that it invites. Immediately after her wailing, Christopher's mother asks him if she can hold his hand, "just for once. Just for me. Will you? I won't hold it hard." But Christopher refuses, saying, "I don't like people holding my hand" (194). It is Christopher's affliction that, in a sense, everyone is other to him; every experience that is not his is other. The ambiguities, imprecisions, and necessary generalizations of symbolization are partly what make possible human contact and understanding-together with the emotional, physical forms of connection we share with animals. As the scene of his mother's wailing shows, Christopher's failure to understand his mother's wailing—a failure of empathy—lies along the same neurological spectrum as his inability to understand her letters (or, indeed, to catch the most ordinary linguistic nuances).

Christopher's particular Asperger's neurological constitution seems to restrict his symbolic actions to sophisticated forms of decoding and puzzle solving, and causes him to regard all others as other. This neurologically imposed auto-alterity reads, in Curious Incident, partly as humor. Christopher's deadpan depictions of people's reactions to him frequently are very funny-as, for instance, when on a London subway, Christopher violently refuses a fellow passenger's offer to help him: "And I said, 'I've got a Swiss Army knife and it has a saw blade and it could cut somebody's fingers off.' And she said, 'OK, buddy. I'm going to take that as a no'" (184). Overall, however, Haddon's depiction of Christopher's isolation, especially from his parents, seems intended to convey and produce an enormous, though complex, sadness. Even with the strengths and resources that he displays throughout the novel, Christopher is terribly vulnerable; he is also desperately loved, but is unable to return that love in recognizable ways. He needs protection, and can never be protected enough; can never be loved enough. He is always, irreducibly, strange, irreducibly himself-always a prime number. The novel ends with his triumph. Having passed his A-levels with honors, he writes that now he will attend university. "And then I will get a First Class Honors degree and I will become a scientist. And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? And I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything" (221). But this triumph, though genuine and impressive, does not obviate the sadness of his untouchability. At the same time, however, this sadness is not Christopher's. It belongs, rather, to his parents and, to generalize from my own reaction, to readers who do not have Asperger's.

6. Alterity is Relative

The novel places us, then, in a complicated situation. Christopher's social and
emotional isolation reads as a terrible sadness, heightened by the irony produced by
Christopher's incomplete awareness of it (which is, perhaps, what truly makes it
isolation). This isolation, as a neurological given, can in part be ameliorated through
education or medication, but it can never be entirely overcome. At the same time,
as this novel presents it, no person truly is other to another. We are all connected
by non-symbolic, indexical, and emotional bonds that we share with other animals,

as well as by symbolic bonds. Moreover, our symbolic capacities are built upon and
cannot exist apart from the earlier, non-symbolic cognitive structures; and all of us
live, think, and interact along a spectrum of symbolic and non-symbolic capacities.

Yet, as this novel also suggests, this spectrum includes as well the autistic spectrum
and its tendencies toward isolation.

This tendency toward isolation is social and political, as we observed earlier, a
product of the late capitalist, post-Thatcher weakening of social bonds. In other
forms of social life, the novel appears to imply, social bonds would be stronger and
tendencies toward isolation and anomie less pronounced. But, as the example of
Christopher and his precisely observed neurological condition suggest, the tendency
toward isolation is, finally, irreducibly neurological. Christopher is, on one level, a
metaphor for the social autism that surrounds him. He is also and, for the purposes
of this novel, more fundamentally an instance of an autistic tendency whose bases
are biological and whose manifestations pervade individual and social life.

Shortly after his mother's collapse into wailing, Christopher describes his favorite
dream. His mother's wailing, I want to stress again, is not an exit from the symbolic
or the social realms. She had been banished by a symbolic act of betrayal: her
letters had been hidden and she was narrated out of her son's life. Her wailing is
her first utterance on returning to the social and symbolic realms, at least with regard
to her family. This animal sound is not an act of departure from the symbolic; quite
the opposite, it is her re-entry into a social-symbolic world from which she had been
erased. Her cry, emerging from her deepest organic and cognitive being, protests
and rejects isolation and silence. Thus, the close juxtaposition late in the novel of
the mother's wailing with Christopher's favorite dream emphasizes unequivocally
Haddon's view that alterity is relative, not absolute. Everyone desires connection,
community, and love. Christopher, after all, searches for his lost mother and has
ambitions to succeed in school and university. Yet everyone maintains a sector of
self that rejects social-symbolic contact and is terrified of touch.

Christopher's dream is an apocalyptic vision in which nearly everyone on earth dies
of a virus. This virus, however, is not biological, but semantic. As Christopher
says, "people catch it because of the meaning of something an infected person says
and the meaning of what they do with their faces when they say it" (198). Because
the virus can spread through televised images and dialogue as well as through
personal contact, it spreads rapidly; soon, the only people left are people like
Christopher who cannot understand facial expressions or the shifting meanings of all
symbolic usage. In this new world, populated only by autistic people, devoid of
symbols, meanings, and ambiguities, Christopher feels liberated. He knows that "no
one is going to talk to me or touch me or ask me a question" (199). He can eat
whatever he wants, play computer games all day, drive cars, and when he goes
home, it's not Father's house anymore, it's mine" (200). When the dream is over,
he says, "I am happy" (200).

Christopher's deepest wish, it seems, is that the world as a site of meaning-the
social-symbolic world-be obliterated. He wishes a reversion to an indexical world
consisting only of objects in which signs, presumably, would be unnecessary or
would be perfect, unvarying emblems for the things themselves. Perhaps, in this
world, Christopher would lose his own false, metaphorical name and would discover
his true one. In any event, through Christopher's dream, Haddon portrays the
apocalyptic imagination as a violent opposition to ambiguity and symbolization—an
interpretation very much in keeping with many of the central apocalyptic texts and
commentaries. Haddon further implies that the apocalyptic imagination is a form
of autistic thinking, and that autistic thinking tends toward apocalypticism. The urge
toward a symbolic reduction so complete that it requires global annihilation, in this
view, is part of the human evolutionary-neurological inheritance. Just as, (as in
Christopher's mother's case), we can never be sufficiently emotionally and
symbolically connected to others; as Christopher's dream implies, neither can we
ever be sufficiently alone. Both these tendencies and desires exist together, in all
people, and in this sense we might read Curious Incident as a neurological

psychomacheia, a drama of the struggle within every soul between opposing positions on the neurological spectrum. Once again, if this interpretation is valid, the social and political conditions depicted in this novel become secondary to, or particular manifestations of conditions and conflicts of our neurology. The ideology of neurology trumps traditional ideology critique.

The problem with this interpretation and its corollaries, however, lies in the amount of care bestowed on Christopher, the avatar of isolation and apocalypse, by the other characters and, again to generalize from my own experience, by the novel's readers. Why should he be an object of care? And why especially should he be an object of care when he cannot reciprocate that care, at least not in ways that those who care for him would wish for? One cares, I think, for Christopher because of his vulnerability, his needs, his limits. The novel presents him continually in the context of this care, even though Christopher's narration seems oblivious to it. Haddon seems almost to present this care as a moral imperative. But rather than indicating reasons for this imperative, Haddon presents it as a fact: his parents care, and others who come in contact with him care, and the reader who encounters him, presumably, cares. One must care because one does care, rather than the reverse.

His vulnerability, which manifests itself through his symbolic and social limitations, demands that one bestow care. Yet, as I have argued, these symbolic and social limitations— which constitute his vulnerability and thus the imperative to care for him—render him both different from and similar to others. His autistic qualities locate him on a neurological spectrum shared by all people. One empathizes with him, and empathizes even with his inability to empathize; one cares even for his inability to care. And this is because, I think, all of us share, in part, this lack of empathy and care, this wish for isolation, even the urge to annihilate the social and symbolic world. It is, perhaps, the absolute self-sufficiency and absolute vulnerability and need of the infant that ultimately demands this care.

But this care requires a social setting: families, communities, institutions. The urge to negate social and symbolic structures also has a place in those same structures. Although care for radical vulnerability may be based in our neurology, different social arrangements and institutions make possible different types and degrees of caring; and though the apocalyptic-autistic sensibility may be a neurological constant, again, different forms of social organization can channel urges toward social-symbolic negation in different directions and with different results—toward art, disciplined spiritual emptying, or other single-minded peaceful pursuits; or toward genocide, war, or greed-inspired destruction of the natural world. In this sense, Haddon's precise depiction of Christopher's social world may not be merely a realist red-herring that is subordinated to implacable neurological foundations. Caring for the most vulnerable, fostering their gifts and their agency, and learning from them is more possible in some societies than in others, and to identify obstacles to caring is a beginning of social critique.

Notes

1. The other as wholly other—the sacred, the sublime, the abject, the Lacanian real, the Levinasian other, in some discussions the traumatic—must be, by definition, off the spectrum, inconceivable and unrepresentable. In some cases, representations of disability, especially linguistic disability, merge with these notions of the wholly other. Melville's Billy Budd, Faulkner's Benjy, DeLillo's Wilder, and many of the subjects of Sacks's case studies all, in different ways, function as surrogates or catachreses for some alterity outside of symbolic categories. See my "Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns Against Language" for a discussion of the relation between representations of linguistic impairment and notions of alterity.

2. One can ask the analogous philosophical question, is there genuine alterity in Hegelian dialectic or Bakhtinian heteroglossia? That is, if the putative "other" can be incorporated into a larger conceptual, historical, or linguistic form, is it still other or is it simply part of a now more complex whole? Or, conversely, is the putative whole-historical process, novelistic form—not whole at all? Is it, rather, an unstable construct, convenient for its formal economy but in reality torn open by genuine alterities and always incompatible with itself? See Prince for a brilliant discussion of these questions with regard to eighteenth century philosophical dialogues. See also
Derrida's critique of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" and Zizek's ongoing commentaries on Hegel.

3. See Baron-Cohen, Baron-Cohen et.al., eds., and Frith for discussions of theory of mind in relation to autism. Although Grandin agrees with the thesis that people on the autistic spectrum lack, in some degree, an ability to grasp other people's perspectives, other people with autism and Asperger's object to this position. See "A Discussion About Theory of Mind: From an Autistic Perspective" for a selection of comments.

4. The philosopher Donald Davidson argues provocatively that metaphors do not have some hidden, alternative meaning that is either substituted for a surface meaning or links two previously unrelated meanings, or that radically disrupts an established meaning. Davidson argues instead that a metaphor simply means what it says—that there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning; there is only literal meaning. Therefore, for Davidson, as for Christopher, metaphors are lies. "Most metaphorical sentences," writes Davidson, "are patently false, just as all similes are trivially true...For a metaphor says only what it shows on its face—usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth. And this plain truth or falsehood needs no paraphrase—its meaning is given in the literal meaning of the words" (258, 59; Davidson's emphasis). Insofar as metaphors can be distinguished from lies, Davidson argues, their difference "is not a difference in the words used or what they mean..., but in how the words are used" (259). Whether one uses words in order to lie or to make a metaphor depends on an understanding of a linguistic—that is, a social-situation: and here, of course, in the realm of social understanding, is where Christopher's competence most falters. For Davidson, the act of thinking about the untruth or absurdity of the metaphor's literal meaning can lead to productive new ways of thinking; but these new ways of thinking are not produced by a special kind of metaphorical meaning. The metaphor means what it says.

5. This linguistic incapacity along the autistic spectrum varies. Prince-Hughes, in her memoir, stresses that social difficulties can coexist with verbal fluency, an observation supported by the research of Tager-Flusberg, who reported that the social and communicative impairments of autism may "not have any identifiable influence on the course of grammatical development" (175).

6. Haddon's interests in language are different from those, for example, of DeLillo's in White Noise. Christopher is not Wilder; he is not a real or imagined wild child, or figure of radical alterity. Because, unlike Wilder, Christopher is portrayed with a clinical precision that lets us see him explicitly as occupying a place on the autistic spectrum, an interpretation of Christopher's relation to language should look less toward philosophy and theology, and more toward evolutionary neurology. See Berger, "Falling Towers." For discussions of the longing for a perfect language, see Eco, Steiner, and Ree.

7. I am not, of course, doing justice in any way to the technical aspects of Damasio's and Edelman's writing. Their arguments rely in part on discussions of brain physiology and mechanisms of physical evolution. I lack both the space and the expertise to comment on these technical discussions here.

8. There is a history of fictional detectives with odd, defining, and socially isolating features. Detectives on television series are particularly prone to the single, defining oddity: Cannon the fat detective, Ironside the paraplegic detective, Columbo the (seemingly) stupid detective, Monk the obsessive-compulsive detective. Similarly, racial and gender deviations from the white male norm function in detective narratives much like physical or neurological impairments. It is striking, however, how in many of these scenarios, the impairment or deviation actually has little to do with the plot. Monk's obsessive-compulsive disorder, for example, is the primary source of the program's humor and contributes in small ways to Monk's ability to solve the mysteries he encounters, but ultimately, his disability is an arbitrary addition to a genre that seems to demand some marginalizing symptom for the protagonist. His disability, and the peculiar features of the other detectives mentioned above, are gimmicks. Christopher's Asperger's, on the other hand, is essential to how his detective narrative unfolds; it determines how he experiences the world and how he thinks.

9. The decline of working class social institutions and practices is portrayed compellingly in post-Thatcher films like The Full Monty and Brassed Off. See also
sociologist Robert Putnam's analysis of the decline of comparable American social practices in Bowling Alone.

10. In The Sound and the Fury, Benjy's incomprehensible moaning is described as "hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant..." (288). In White Noise, after Wilder has cried continuously for seven hours, his father imagines he has "just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place" (79), uttering "a sound so large and pure...saying nameless things...an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony" (78).

11. The Book of Revelation contrasts the purity and incommensurability of the New Jerusalem with the economic and sexual exchanges that characterize Babylon. Zizek glosses the "second death" referred to in Revelation 20:6, 14 as the extinguishing of the symbolic order that completes the destruction of the physical world (Sublime Object, 132-34; Looking Awry, 22-23). See also Kermode and Berger (After the End) for interpretations of apocalyptic desire as a wish to end ambiguity.

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