On Autism

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Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.
—Gertrude Stein

A word lands on a table. Any word—say the word *glass*, spoken between two people in a quiet room. For one of the listeners, the word does not stay where it landed. It slides. It goes to the glass on the table, which goes to the window, which goes to transparency, which goes to seeing through things, which goes to insight, which goes to its opposite, which goes to the eyes of the person across the table, and now the listener is somewhere the word *glass* never mentioned and never intended, carried there by couplings so fast and so habitual that not one of them registered as an event. The chain is the signifying chain. It is the river that language rides, and most people are

in the river whether they know it or not, carried downstream by a current they cannot feel because the current is indistinguishable from the water.

For the other listener, the word stays.

It sits on the table. It means glass: the amorphous solid, the supercooled silica, the material that is technically a liquid that gave up flowing, that is transparent because its electrons have no convenient gaps to absorb visible light into, that breaks along conchoidal fractures, that holds water and cuts skin. The word means what it means and exactly what it means, at a resolution the first listener never reached, because the first listener was already three links downstream before the material properties could come into focus. The understanding is not lesser. It is stricter. Nothing failed. The chain did not break down; it was never the point.

The difference between the two listeners is not intelligence, not attention, not warmth, not love. It is the behavior of one word on one table—whether it slides or whether it stays. Everything that follows is the unpacking of that difference.

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Psychoanalysis has a small set of words for what a person can structurally be, and one word it refuses to write.

The structures are not diagnoses in the medical sense. They are not defects, deviations from a baseline, conditions awaiting cure. They are positions: each one a different settlement between a subject and the symbolic order, which is the name the tradition gives to the whole apparatus of language, law, and signification that a human being is born into and must somehow come to inhabit.

The word the tradition refuses to write is *normal*. Normal would mean a subject whose settlement is complete—a person who arrived, whose relationship to language is finished business. The refusal is not a quirk of style. It is the foundation of the entire edifice. The founding insight of psychoanalysis is that there is no arrived state: everyone is in negotiation, everyone is arranged, more or less stably, around a lack that language installed and that language cannot fill. Write *normal* once, and the field collapses into the business every other psychology has become—the sorting of people into bins, and the treatment of the ones in the wrong bin. The tradition would sooner build a cathedral of Greek and French than write those six letters, and the cathedral is the point. The obscurity is a form of care.

But the refusal creates an awkwardness that the tradition resolved in the most revealing possible way. If

there is no normal, what do you call the people who are more or less getting on with it—who have problems, know it, can talk about the problems, and find that the talking goes somewhere? The tradition calls them neurotic. Neurosis is the unwritten word wearing a clinical coat. It is the condition of a subject who accepted the bargain—who entered language, submitted to its law, paid its toll—and now lives inside the symbolic order with all the friction, compromise, and repetitive tripping-over that the bargain entails. The neurotic's problems are tractable. The signs exist. The arrows point. With help, they can be read, and reading them leads somewhere new.

And then the tradition cleaves neurosis—cleaves the unwritten normal—into two suspiciously familiar poles.

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The hysteric asks: *am I a man or a woman?* Not a question about anatomy; a question about position. The hysteric is the subject who does not know what she is, whose desire is the desire of the Other, who wants to be wanted and cannot let the wanting settle, because a settled answer would end the question and the question is the position. Lacan gave the hysteric's engine its formula:

che vuoi?—what do you want from me? The question is addressed to everyone the hysteric meets and can never be answered to her satisfaction, because any answer is immediately suspect: *yes, but is that really what you want, or only what you say? Yes, but do you love me, or are you answering because I asked?* The hysteric's relationship to the signifier is virtuosic. The chain slides, and the hysteric rides it—surfs it—using the slide itself to keep the Other's desire alive and unsettled, which is to say, to keep herself alive and unsettled, which is the same thing.

The obsessional asks: *am I alive or dead?* This is the subject who is not sure he exists and defends against finding out. He substitutes thinking about desire for having it, the plan for the act, the preparation for the event. His relationship to the signifier is administrative. The chain slides, but slowly, under supervision, in circuits he manages like a registrar—every signifier filed, cross-referenced, checked against every other—because the one thing the obsessional cannot tolerate is the arrival of something unexpected, and the unexpected is desire's native form. He is never ready. He is permanently about to be ready. He postpones living until the Other has stopped watching, and the Other never stops

watching, and the postponement quietly becomes the life.

These are girls and boys. Not all girls, not all boys; not essentially, not biologically, not by decree. But the resonance is deafening, and the tradition heard it perfectly, which is why it wrapped the observation in six layers of Greek. The hysteric who asks *what am I?* and rides the chain and refuses the pin—that is femininity as it is lived, not as it is theorized. The obsessional who asks *do I exist?* and defers the act and administers the system—that is masculinity as it is lived. Psychoanalysis described the two normalities with clinical exactness and then declined, forever, to say what it had done.

The declining is not cowardice. It is prophylaxis. The moment the tradition writes *normal female* and *normal male*, the split is naturalized, and naturalizing it is the one move the whole enterprise exists to prevent. The clinical vocabulary keeps the structures visible as structures rather than natures: the obsessional woman exists, the hysterical man exists, and they remain thinkable exactly as long as the structural terms refuse to collapse onto the biological categories they so suspiciously resemble. The terminology is a barrier deliberately maintained between the observation and the anatomy, because direct contact would harden a description into an

essence, and an essence is what the field was founded to refuse. The Greek is not obscurantism. The Greek is the glove.

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Beyond the two neuroses, the other settlements, briefly, because they will be needed.

The pervert says: *I know the law, and I will serve it by transgressing it.* The pervert has not rejected the symbolic order; he has embraced it more thoroughly than anyone, because he needs the prohibition in order to have something to transgress, and without the transgression he has no position at all. His characteristic invention is the fetish: the object that covers the lack. Octave Mannoni wrote its formula—*I know very well, but nevertheless*—the knowledge and its refusal held simultaneously, with the object as the hinge. The fetish is a lid. It is placed over the wound so precisely that the pervert can continue to operate above it indefinitely.

The psychotic said nothing, because the saying was never installed. The signifier that would have anchored the whole chain—the quilting point that pins signifier to signified and keeps the fabric of meaning from sliding into open water—was not repressed but foreclosed: not buried where it might one day be dug up, but ex-

pelled from the symbolic order entirely, never received, never on the premises. And what is foreclosed from the symbolic returns from the real. It does not come back as a symptom, legible, interpretable, traceable to its source, the way the repressed returns in neurosis. It comes back as hallucination: raw, unmediated, undigestible, irrupting into the field without the symbolic escort that would make it manageable. The psychotic is not outside the law by choice. The psychotic was never issued the entry ticket, and everything that follows—the delusion, the persecution, the sealed interpretive machine—is a construction built by the subject in the place where the symbolic order should have been.

Four settlements, then: negotiation, supplementation, foreclosure. And a fourth term the tradition has never known where to put.

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Freud's founding case of phobia was a five-year-old boy who was afraid of horses—afraid one would bite him, afraid one would fall down—and who organized his entire life around not encountering them, which in the Vienna of 1908 meant organizing his life around not going outside. Lacan devoted a full year of his seminar to little Hans, and at the end of it he declined to make phobia

a structure at all. He called it a turntable—*une plaque tournante*—a rotating platform from which the subject can be switched toward hysteria, toward obsession, toward perversion. A turntable is not a position. It is a device for changing positions. And he called the phobic object a *signifiant à tout faire*: an all-purpose signifier, a signifier for every job.

Take both remarks seriously and follow them further than their author did, and the geometry of phobia opens up.

Begin with the object. The phobic object is the inverse of the fetish, and the inversion is exact. The fetish is a lid: it covers the lack, seals the hole, says *nothing to see here, this object stands in for the missing thing, move along*. The phobic object is an aperture: it does not cover the lack, it radiates it. The spider, the bridge, the open square, the sealed room—none of these is dangerous in itself. Each is dangerous as an opening, a puncture in the surface of the ordinary through which the unmanageable becomes visible. The fetishist says *I know very well, but nevertheless* and continues. The phobic says *I know very well that it is only a spider* and cannot continue. The same split knowledge. Opposite directions of travel. One structure plugs the hole; the other structure is the

hole, walking around the world, wearing the disguise of an animal.

Now watch what the phobic actually does, station by station, and count the positions.

At a distance from the object, the phobic is an obsessional. The route planning, the checked rooms, the mapped exits, the elaborate defensive administration of not-encountering: this is the obsessional's deferral in another coat, the bureaucracy of avoidance maintained with exhausting precision so that the event never arrives.

At the threshold—when the object appears despite everything, when the spider is simply there on the wall—the phobic becomes a hysteric. *What is it? What does it want? Why is it here? Why now?* The subject stands before a presence whose desire cannot be read, flooded by exactly the question that is the hysteric's permanent address to the world.

In the object's elevation, the structure is perverse, inverted. The phobic object is set apart from all other objects—special, charged, untouchable, radiating an intensity no ordinary object possesses. That is the fetishist's operation with the sign flipped: the anti-fetish, the object enthroned not to conceal the lack but to embody it. The phobic honors the spider with the

same isolating reverence the fetishist grants the shoe. It is the fetish turned inside out and worshipped anyway.

And at contact—when the defenses fail and the object is not at a distance but here, on the skin, in the room with the door closed—the structure is psychotic. The panic attack is a local psychosis: the symbolic collapses, the signifier goes silent, raw affect floods the body without mediation. What arrives in panic is precisely what arrives in hallucination—the real, unescorted—except that it arrives on schedule, at a known address, wearing the animal's face.

Obsessional at a distance. Hysteric at the threshold. Perverse in the elevation. Psychotic at contact. The phobic cycles through every position on the clinical map in relation to a single object, and the phobia is the discipline of never completing the circuit. Lacan's turntable, rotated all the way around. And this yields the strange, correct conclusion about what the phobic is actually afraid of. Not the spider. The spider is an officer of something else. What the phobic is fleeing is structural location itself—the terror of being pinned, assigned, told *you are this, you occupy this position, this is your structure*. The phobic object par excellence is the clinical diagram. The phobic is the subject in flight from the map, and the map gives chase, and the flight visits

every province of the territory it refuses to be a citizen of.

The phobic proves the map is real by being terrified of every part of it.

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And then there is a position that is not on the map—not fleeing it, not cycling through it, not refusing it. Elsewhere.

When the word *glass* lands and stays on the table, run down the list of everything that has *not* happened. The signifier has not been repressed: repression is the neurotic solution, the word buried alive where it goes on working and can one day be exhumed. It has not been disavowed: disavowal is the perverse solution, the knowledge split and a lid installed. It has not been foreclosed: foreclosure is the psychotic catastrophe, the word never received at all, returning later from outside as noise—and the word *was* received, received perfectly, at higher fidelity than the sliding listener ever achieved. And it has not become an aperture of dread; there is no flight, no circuit, no turntable.

The signifier arrived. It was taken in. It was understood—precisely, completely. And then it did not slide.

To the four verbs the tradition knows—negotiate, supplement, expel, flee—this adds a fifth: *hold*. The word is held. It is treated as a thing with weight and texture and exact extension, an object among objects, rather than as a vehicle whose whole purpose is to be ridden somewhere else. And a subject whose signifiers are held rather than ridden lives in language the way a person lives in a house built to precise specification: every wall where the drawing says, every measurement true, the structure sound, the doors opening onto exactly what they open onto. The house is not a prison; the doors work. But the windows are not where other houses put their windows, and the views the other houses offer—the associative vistas, the chains of half-meaning opening at every turn, the whole sliding, glinting traffic of the signifier—are not available from this architecture. Different windows. Different views. Not fewer. Different.

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The word itself has a history, and the history explains seventy years of confusion, so it is worth telling with dates.

In 1911, in Zurich, Eugen Bleuler needed a term for one feature of the illness he was renaming schizophre-

nia: the patient's withdrawal from the shared world into a private one, the turning of the self inward upon the self. He built the word from the Greek *autos*, self: autism, self-ism, the enclosure of a subject inside its own walls. The word was coined for psychosis. That is its birth certificate.

In 1943, at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Leo Kanner published a paper on eleven children unlike any patients in the literature, and reached for Bleuler's adjective: *Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*. In 1944, in Vienna, with the war between them, Hans Asperger published his postdoctoral thesis on another group of such children and reached for the same word. One year apart, two clinicians, one borrowed term—a coincidence that may have had a courier, since Georg Frankl, a diagnostician from Asperger's own clinic, had left Vienna and was working in Kanner's by the time the Baltimore paper was written. However the word traveled, it arrived pre-loaded. It carried Bleuler's thesis inside it: that this condition is a withdrawal, a retreat from a shared world the subject once inhabited, a self curled around itself.

The thesis is wrong, and the wrongness organized decades. The children Kanner and Asperger described had not withdrawn from the common world; their rela-

tion to it had been different from the start—not a retreat but another architecture. But the name said withdrawal, and the institutions followed the name. For nearly forty years the American nosology filed these children under childhood schizophrenia; not until 1980 did the diagnostic manual give autism a page of its own, and not until Lorna Wing's work around the same time did the field acquire the idea of a spectrum—and exhume Asperger's forgotten thesis in the process. The condition spent its first medical lifetime living under a psychotic's name, in a psychotic's paragraph, treated by clinicians reading a birth certificate that belonged to someone else.

And there is a finer irony in the etymology, visible only from inside the tradition. *Autos*, self: but the tradition's deepest teaching is that the self is not a given—that the subject is constituted from outside, by the Other, in the mirror and in language, assembled out of borrowed images and inherited words. The tradition that holds the self to be an effect of the Other named this condition *self-ism*, as if these subjects had too much self, when the honest description was always that they had a different contract with the Other's currency. The name is a thesis. The thesis is Bleuler's. And Bleuler was describing someone else.

But Kanner, whatever his word choice, was a great observer, and in the 1943 paper he set down two cardinal signs whose precision has never been improved. The first he called *extreme autistic aloneness*. The second he called an *insistence on sameness*. Read that second phrase against the opening of this essay. The insistence on sameness is the signifier that stays. It was written down at the origin, by the founder, in the founding document—the whole thesis, four words long, waiting eighty years to be read structurally.

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The strongest evidence is the smallest, and Kanner recorded that too.

Among the most reliable early signs he documented was a peculiarity of pronouns: the child who wants a bath says, *Do you want a bath?* The child refers to himself as *you* and to his mother as *I*, reproducing the pronouns exactly as they were heard. The literature calls this pronoun reversal, and for decades it was read as a deficit of self—fittingly, given the diagnosis's name—as though the child could not locate his own person.

The linguistics says otherwise. Roman Jakobson called words like *I* and *you* shifters: signifiers whose referent shifts with every act of speech, meaning whoever

utters them, made of pure context. Émile Benveniste sharpened it: *I* refers to nothing in the world at all; it refers only to the instance of discourse in which it is pronounced. The shifter is the most fluid coin in the entire currency of language—a word that changes hands, and meaning, with every exchange, the signifier at its maximum slide.

Now look again at the child. The word *you* arrived, addressed to him—*do you want a bath?*—and the word stayed. It kept the meaning it carried when it landed: *you* means this child, the one who wants the bath, because that is what it meant on arrival. The child is not failing to locate himself. The child is refusing, or rather not performing, the one operation the shifter demands: the re-assignment of the word with every change of speaker. He treats the most fluid coin in the currency as a medal struck once. The pronoun does not reverse. The pronoun *holds*. It is the word *glass* on the table, at the exact point in the language where the sliding is supposed to be mandatory.

Echolalia reads the same way. The child asked *do you want juice?* answers *do you want juice?*—and the exchange is scored as failure, as parroting, as absence. But watch what the words are doing: they are being handled as objects, received whole, held, and given

back whole, the way one returns a cup. And the delayed form is stranger and more beautiful. Kanner's papers record utterances that seemed like nonsense—irrelevant sentences produced at odd moments—until the history was taken and each one turned out to be an exact quotation with its original scene still attached. One of the eleven first children would say, whenever he was tempted to throw something, *don't throw the dog off the balcony*: his mother's sentence, spoken years before, about a toy dog, in a hotel, once. The sentence had been stored whole, with its scene, and was redeployed whole, at every recurrence of the occasion. Not language as a river. Language as a collection: every entry catalogued with its provenance, a dictionary in which every definition is a memoir. The clinicians called these utterances irrelevant. They were the most relevant objects in the room. They were the archive, speaking.

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The perceptual research found the same structure at the level of the eye, and then argued for thirty years about what to call it.

The experimental facts are stable. On the embedded-figures test—find the small shape hidden inside the big picture—autistic subjects are faster. On block design,

often superior. Where the ordinary eye is captured by the whole and must labor to see the parts, this eye has native access to the parts and must labor, sometimes, to assemble the gestalt. Uta Frith, who did as much as anyone to establish the phenomenon, named it *weak central coherence*: a weakness in the drive that binds details into wholes. A generation later, Laurent Mottron's group looked at the same data and named it *enhanced perceptual functioning*: a strength in the register of the particular. The same findings. Two adjectives. The entire politics of the field smuggled into the choice between *weak* and *enhanced*—deficit or difference, hole or architecture—while the data sat still and said only: the parts are seen before the whole, and sometimes instead of it.

Everyone has met the benign edge of this. The reason most readers sail past a doubled word—*the the*—is that fluent reading is not perception but prediction: the mind interpolates, fills the line in from the chain's own material, reads what should be there. The proofreader who catches every doubled article is the reader in whom the interpolation is turned down and the seeing is turned up—the reader for whom the word on the page is an object before it is a signal. Precision of that

kind is a sensory fact before it is a cognitive style, and it scales.

It scales all the way to persons. The socially fluent read a room by interpolation: riding the chain, filling the gaps between signals with the chain's own material, reading between the lines so fluently that the reading sometimes replaces the lines. The autistic subject reads the room the way a seismograph reads the ground: with extraordinary sensitivity to the vibration and no narrative about what the vibration means—a fidelity to the signal that the narrativizing mind cannot match, because the narrativizing mind has already converted the signal into a story, and the story is a lossy compression, and what was lost is the particular. The report of the signal arrives without the associative packaging that would make it feel like empathy in the conventional key, and so it is routinely mistaken for its opposite: for coldness, for absence. It is not coldness. It is the measurement without the interpretation. And the measurement is sometimes worth more than the interpretation, because the interpretation was always partly fiction—always partly the chain generating its own material and filing it under your name.

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Freud noticed, at the very beginning, that something about his new science embarrassed him, and he confessed it in print, in the middle of a case:

> *It still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science.*

The apology was misplaced, but the observation was exact, and it contains a theorem about form. The neurotic's life is narratable. Because the signifying chain slides, the neurotic's history has trajectory—beginnings, developments, reversals, an arc—and arcs are the raw material of story. Every case history of a neurosis is a novel waiting to happen; every novel is the case history of a neurosis that did. The form fits the structure. Freud wrote short stories because his patients were living them.

The life organized around the held signifier resists that form—not for lack of events, but because the events do not chain associatively. They chain temporally, categorically: this, and then this, and also this, each item complete in itself, sitting on the table like the word *glass*, present, exact, meaning what it means. Such a life is not

a story. It is a catalog. And the catalog is not the story's poor relation. The catalog is older.

The oldest writing in the world is inventory. Before anyone wrote a narrative, someone in Uruk pressed a stylus into clay to count grain and sheep—tallies of the given and the owed, particulars held in columns. The list is the first written relationship to language, and it is the relationship in which every signifier stays exactly where it is put. Narrative is the late arrival, the ornament on the ledger.

Even the founding narrative of the West carries its older ancestor inside it, undigested. In the second book of the *Iliad*, the story stops, the poet calls on the Muses, confesses that he could not tell over the multitude nor name them—not with ten tongues and ten mouths—and then names them anyway: two hundred and sixty-odd lines of ships, contingents, captains, home harbors, and head-counts. The Catalogue of Ships. Readers bred on plot have called it an interruption for two and a half millennia—a bureaucratic boulder in the stream of the drama. But the scholars' consensus runs the other way: the catalog preserves the oldest stratum of the poem. The ships were counted before Achilles was angry. The list is not an interruption of the epic. The epic is an elaboration of the list.

The catalog has its saints and its cautionary tale. Georges Perec, patron of the inventory, instructed his readers to interrogate the habitual—*question your teaspoons*—and spent three October days in 1974 in the Place Saint-Sulpice writing down only what every narrative omits: the buses, the pigeons, the passersby, the weather; an attempt, as his title says, at exhausting a place; a catalog of what happens when nothing happens. And Borges supplied the limit case in Funes the Memorious: the young man who, after his fall, forgets nothing—for whom the dog at three-fourteen seen in profile is a different creature from the dog at three-fifteen seen head-on, who is troubled that both bear one name. Funes drowns in particulars, and Borges draws the moral like a blade: to think is to forget differences, to generalize, to abstract. Funes is the catalog with no form, the held signifier at infinite resolution, and he is unlivable—which marks the real boundary. The livable catalog has form: columns, provenance, the ledger's discipline. The difference between an archive and a flood is architecture.

And the catalog has one indisputable masterpiece. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* opens by announcing that the world is the totality of facts, not of things, and then delivers the world accordingly: seven propo-

sitions and their decimal expansions, 1, 1.1, 1.11, every sentence a numbered entry in a tree, philosophy composed as pure inventory—the most rigorously catalogued book in the history of thought, ending with an entry for what cannot be entered. Its author then spent the rest of his life discovering the other room: that meaning is use, that words live in games, that the signifier slides through forms of life and takes its sense from the traffic. Early and late Wittgenstein are the two listeners at the table in one biography—the word held, then the word released—and philosophy has never settled which room the masterpiece is in. It does not have to. Both rooms are real. That is the point.

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Asperger, watching his Viennese children, dropped a remark that the field would spend decades formalizing: that the autistic mind looked to him like an extreme variant of male intelligence. Modern research built the observation into a theory—systemizing against empathizing, the pattern-drive against the person-drive, autism as the far right tail of the masculine distribution. The theory contains a real signal and a structural mistake, and the mistake is instructive.

If autism were simply masculinity at maximum, it would be obsessionality at maximum: the administrative relation to the signifier, turned up. But the two are distinguishable, and the distinction has a test. The obsessional's system is a fortification. It is built against desire; its rituals are anxious; interrupt one and what erupts is dread—the checked lock unchecked, the catastrophe suddenly possible. The obsessional's order is a coat put on against a specific cold, and under analysis, as the cold abates, the coat can come off. The autistic subject's order is not a coat. It is the grain of the wood. The pattern is not defending against anything; it is how the signifier natively organizes when it does not slide. Interrupt the routine and the distress is real but of another kind entirely—not dread of consequence but the specific pain of a word shoved off its table, an entry torn from its column. One order is worn. The other order is the material. You can disarm a fortification. You cannot talk the grain out of the wood, and there is no reason to want to.

Now consider the blend—not the pure type, which exists only in textbooks and in the daydreams of diagnosticians, but the lived person, who always occupies more than the theory has slots for. The autistic grain modulated through femininity is a specific and recog-

nizable phenomenon, and it is one of the quiet glories of the human range. The precision is fully present: the pattern-hunger, the held signifier, the seismograph's fidelity. And the warmth is fully present too—care, attunement, tenderness—arriving not through the hysteric's channel of ridden desire but through a different one: through exactness itself, through attention so fine it constitutes a form of love. It is a double extension, and the doubleness is the shape of a tree. A tree does not go up and then down and then up again; a tree goes up and down at once, roots driving into the earth while branches open into the sky, and the simultaneity is what makes it growth rather than repetition. The systemizing goes down into roots. The warmth goes up into branches. The trunk, where the two negotiate, is the person. Remove either direction and the organism dies; the blend is not a mixture, where the ingredients surrender their identity, but a tree, where both extensions stay visible and the life is in their simultaneity.

The converse deformation—the social fluency with the grain removed, the slide with nothing held—has its own pathology, and it is the pathology of surfaces. The conversation that goes everywhere and lands nowhere. The warmth that is genuine and empty at once, the way cotton candy is genuine and empty at once: real sweet-

ness, no substance, dissolving on contact. A mirror facing a mirror produces an infinite corridor of reflections that looks like depth and is the purest emptiness there is. When every word slides, no word lands; when every response is associative, no response is specific; and the warmth, unanchored by any particular, becomes a performance of warmth—distinguishable from the real thing in exactly one way: it never says *glass* and means *glass*. The precision is what makes the tenderness real. The grain is what the warmth is *about*.

Because the interesting things happen at collisions. Two tectonic plates with no business sharing a latitude meet, and the meeting makes a mountain range that belongs to neither plate—it belongs to the suture. Intelligence lives at sutures, and art, and humor, and love. A system with no user is a crystal. A user with no system is weather. The blend is the thing; the blend is always the thing; and the blend, wherever it is genuinely alive, is always a tree.

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In the summer of 1965, on her aunt's ranch in Arizona, an eighteen-year-old watched cattle being run through a squeeze chute—the V-shaped stall that presses a steer firmly on both flanks to hold it still—and noticed that

the pressure did not merely restrain the animals. It calmed them. She was autistic, overwhelmed for years by a nervous system that made an ordinary embrace unbearable, and she understood the chute at once, from the inside. So she built one for herself: plywood panels lined with foam, a V-shaped trough to kneel into, a lever under her own control that pressed the sides against her body. Deep pressure, on demand, at her own hand. Temple Grandin used the squeeze machine for decades, wrote about it in *Thinking in Pictures*, and built a career on the same act of perception, designing livestock systems used across an industry because she could see what the cattle saw—the particular shadow, the specific flapping thing—that the narrativizing human eye interpolated away.

Understand what the machine is, structurally. A hug delivers two things at once: the pressure, and the person. And the person arrives carrying the enigma—*che vuoi?*, what does this embrace want from me, what am I to it, what must I return—the full freight of the Other's desire, which for this nervous system is not a warmth wrapped around the pressure but a second, unmeterable pressure wrapped around the first. The squeeze machine is the hug with the enigma subtracted. Pressure with the demand at zero. Contact, without the

question. It is not a rejection of touch; it is the isolation of touch's physical layer from its interrogative one—an engineering solution to a problem the clinic had not yet learned to state.

The Lacanians who finally took autism seriously on its own terms gave that solution its general name. Rosine and Robert Lefort, after decades of clinical work, proposed that autism is a structure in its own right—a fourth, distinct settlement, not a psychosis manqué. Jean-Claude Maleval, in the fullest account the tradition has produced, described the autistic subject's characteristic construction as a *bord*: a rim, an edge, a built border between the subject and the world—the autistic object carried everywhere, the double, and above all the specific interest, the domain of expertise elaborated year over year. The rim is where the subject and the world transact. Everything crosses at the rim, on the subject's terms, at the subject's rate.

And here the essay can say something the clinic's vocabulary cannot, because the right description of the rim is mathematical. A rim is not a wall. A wall is a seal: two sides, no traffic, and—this is the point—no length worth measuring. A rim is a *coast*. And coasts have a famous property. Lewis Fry Richardson discovered it in the margins of another project, and Mandelbrot made it

canonical: the measured length of a coastline depends on the length of your ruler, and as the ruler shrinks, the length grows—without bound. A coastline is a curve of finite enclosure and unbounded length. The more finely you walk it, the longer it gets. There is always another cove.

The special interest is a coastline. From outside it looks like a confinement: one subject, one territory—steam locomotives, dinosaurs, the reign dates of kings, the primes. A bounded domain; the observer pities the boundary. But the boundary is not where the subject is trapped. The boundary is where the subject *lives*, and the boundary is fractal. Locomotives open into valve gear, into boiler pressures, into the liveries of regional railways, into timetables, into the acoustics of specific whistles—finite territory, infinite shoreline, and every increase in resolution yields new coastline that was rigorously implied and never yet walked. The monotropic attention that the deficit model describes as a tunnel is, seen truly, a coast surveyed at ever finer grain. A wall has two sides and no length. A coast has one side facing the open sea and no end to its measurement. The special interest is not the subject's cell. It is the subject's shore—and the tide brings things in.

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Late in his career, Lacan returned to the problem he had started with and never solved—the subject for whom the standard symbolic settlement is not available—and he found his answer in a writer. James Joyce, by the structural indications, should have gone under: the foreclosure was there, the relation to language was shattered at the root. Joyce did not go under. Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake*. And Lacan's last great concept names what the *Wake* was: a sinthome—the old spelling of symptom, from before the word was domesticated by medicine—meaning not what is wrong with you but the knot you tie yourself when the standard knot was never tied for you. The sinthome is not a cure and not a failure. It is a construction: the thing built inside the unshared condition that makes the condition livable. Joyce built a private language that was also a home, installed a door in a wall that had no door, and lived there, and the literature moved in after him.

The sinthome is the symptom homesteaded. And the autistic subject, it should now be clear, has been homesteading from the beginning—has never done anything else. The rim is a sinthome. The squeeze machine is a sinthome in plywood. The catalog is a sinthome in

columns; the coast of the special interest is a sinthome surveyed to ever finer resolution; the stored sentence with its scene attached is a sinthome one utterance long. The tradition arrived at its final, most generous concept by studying an Irish novelist, and the concept turns out to describe, point for point, what the subjects filed under Bleuler's borrowed word had been building all along, unfunded and undiagnosed: a language of one's own; a house to exact specification; doors that open onto what they open onto. The autistic subject does not need to be led to the sinthome. The autistic subject is the tradition's standing proof that it works.

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For fifty years the clinical literature located the communicative deficit in one place: in the autistic subject, who was said to lack a theory of other minds. Then someone thought to run the obvious control. Damian Milton, a sociologist and himself autistic, named the hypothesis in 2012—the double empathy problem: perhaps the breakdown between autistic and non-autistic people is not a defect in one party but a property of the crossing, and runs in both directions. The experiments followed and were unkind to the older story. Pass a story down a chain of autistic adults, and it survives as accurately as

it does down a chain of non-autistic adults; the degradation appears in the mixed chains, at the interfaces, in both directions equally. Autistic subjects read each other. Non-autistic subjects read each other. The signal dies at the border between architectures—and for half a century the failure of the border was billed entirely to the side that did not own the journals, the clinics, or the manuals. The deficit was real. Its address was wrong. It lives at the crossing, and a crossing has two sides.

Which returns the essay to maps, and lets it say precisely what kind of object the clinical diagram is. The mathematicians have a name for the honest case. When a surface is curved enough that no single flat map can cover it without lying somewhere, the discipline does not force the map. It assembles an atlas: a collection of charts, each valid on its own region, none valid everywhere, together with the transition functions—the rules for translating between charts where their regions overlap. The chart is not wrong. The chart is local. The dignity of an atlas is that it says so.

The clinical diagram—neurosis in its two dialects, perversion, psychosis, with phobia spinning on its turntable among them—is a chart. On its own region it is magnificent: the phobic, terrified of every province, proves how real the region is. But the subject for whom

the signifier holds is not at the chart's edge; she is off the chart, on ground the chart's coordinates were never fitted to, and every attempt to extend the old coordinates onto the new ground has produced the literature of error—the psychosis that isn't, the withdrawal that never happened, the deficit at the wrong address. The manual wanted to be the map of one country. It will have to settle for being an atlas. That is not a demotion. An atlas is what honest cartography looks like on a world with curvature.

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So the tradition's founding refusal turns out to have a second clause, folded inside the first, waiting.

Psychoanalysis refuses to write *normal*, because normal would end the field: it would install the arrived subject, the completed settlement, the baseline from which everything else is deviation. But the same gesture, read all the way down, also refuses to write *abnormal*—and that is the refusal that matters now. A different chart is not a deviation from the first chart. A surface is not an error about a plane. The subject for whom the word stays is not the exception that tests the rule; she is the demonstration that the rule has a jurisdiction, that the jurisdiction has a border, and that beyond the border

there are other rules, differently structured, producing other subjects, who live in other houses and look out of other windows.

At the same world. That is the ending worth insisting on. Not different worlds—the same world, surveyed by different architectures, rendered in different forms. The neurotic tells a story about the world, and the story is beautiful and partial. The autistic subject keeps a catalog of the world, and the catalog is beautiful and partial. Both partial. Both beautiful. Neither normal. Neither abnormal. The novel and the inventory are both true books about the same territory, and the older of the two is the inventory, and the territory does not prefer.

A word lands on a table. In one room it sits there, and means what it means, and the meaning is complete, and the completeness is a life. In another room the same word slides away down the chain and becomes a poem, or a symptom, or a love affair, and the sliding is a life. Both rooms are real. Both words are the same word. The table does not prefer.

In 1913 Gertrude Stein wrote a line that the century has never stopped repeating and never quite stopped mocking: *rose is a rose is a rose is a rose*. Heard from inside the sliding, it is redundancy—a needle stuck, a word jumping on the spot. But Stein knew exactly what

the line was doing, and said so: she thought that in that line the rose was red for the first time in English poetry in a hundred years. A century of verse had slid the word—rose to love to blush to transience to every cheek and every dawn—until the flower itself had leached out of it entirely. Stein's repetition is not a stutter. It is a hand laid flat on a word to keep it on the table: said once, a rose; said again, still a rose; said a third time, a rose *insisting*—the signifier pinned back to the flower by force of iteration, in public, in a poem, at the very center of literary modernism. The most famous sentence of the twentieth century's avant-garde is a sentence in which the word refuses to slide. And it is loved. It has been loved for a hundred years by readers who could not have said why.

