



December 2014

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Recommended Citation

Ryskamp, Dani Alexis (2014) "Neurodiversity's Lingua Franca?: *The Wild Iris*, *Autobiography of Red*, and the Breakdown of Cognitive Barriers Through Poetic Language," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol7/iss1/5>

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Neurodiversity's Lingua Franca?: *The Wild Iris*, *Autobiography of Red*, and the Breakdown of Cognitive Barriers Through Poetic Language

Third Place Paper, Winter 2014

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In “Fractioned Idiom: Poetry and the Language of Autism,” Kristina Chew suggests a distinctive link between poetic language and neuroatypical language, particularly that of autistic individuals. By better understanding the poetic elements of neurodivergent language, she argues, we may be better suited both to understand “the ‘random utterances’ of those whose words may be few indeed” and to respond meaningfully. In “Toward a Postcolonial Neurology: Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-poetics of the Body,” Ralph James Savarese argues that the “alternative embodiment” of neuroatypical poets – such as Mukhopadhyay, who is autistic – “gives rise to both a different sense of relation and a different way with words,” one marked by the use and expression of metaphoric and metonymic associations, a “persistent animism,” and a “radical synesthesia.” Such experiences, argues Savarese, “arm” their neuroatypical writer “in a world that is often quite hostile to the neurological other.” These poetic forms also offer an entry for neurotypical readers into a world of cognitive and emotional difference that must be experienced to be understood. It is a world often shunned by the “normal,” within which merely to exist is to be found “monstrous” and in which what is meant is often expressed only in the “white space” of what is not said. In Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*, neurodivergence as depression is introduced but just as soon disavowed; throughout the poem, Glück distances her human speaker from the very poetic forms that mark neurodivergence by placing these forms in the “mouths” of the flowering plants that populate the human speaker's garden. In Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, however, these same forms are attributed immediately and un-self-consciously to the main character, Geryon. By mapping neurodivergent poetic landscapes of animism, metaphoric and metonymic associations, and synesthesia in two different ways – one far, one near – these two poetic works suggest ways in which communication between the neurotypical and the neuroatypical might be not only possible, but practiced.

“It is impossible to overstate the impact of an alternative neurology,” notes Savarese, citing cognitive scientist George Lakoff's assertion that the mind-body connection is so powerful that we can think “only what our embodied brains permit” (275, 280). In fact, the neurotypical brain may be limited even further. Savarese quotes an argument made by Julie Kane in “Poetry as Right-Hemispheric Language,” in which Kane points out that literacy, not neurotypicality per se, precipitates the shift from right-brain-dominant thinking and communication to left-brain-dominant, language-based communication:

If left-hemispheric dominance for language is not the ‘natural’ condition of human beings aged eight and older, but rather, a side effect of print literacy, then it stands to reason that *the qualitative changes in consciousness* between oral and print cultures – from community identity, “magical thinking,” pervasive animist spirituality, and poetry to individualism, science, and rationalism, faith-based religion or agnosticism/atheism, and prose – may be the outward signs of a fundamental shift from right- to left-

hemispheric structuring of conscious thought processes and memories. (qtd in R.J. Savarese 285)

Similarly, studies of brain activity and emotional response have found that when left-hemisphere activity inhibits right-hemisphere activity, affected individuals show a marked decrease in "actual felt empathy" and other emotional processes (E.J. Savarese 102). Or, as the human speaker of *The Wild Iris* notes in the sixth of the ten "Vespers" poems: "You thought we didn't know. But we knew once, / children know these things" (44).

In addition to its association with poetic language, a dominant right brain is associated with a number of cognitive and mood disorders, including autism and depression (E.T. Savarese 102; Hecht 77). Thus poetic language may provide access to a right-brain-dominant world, even when neither the author nor the reader meets any diagnostic criteria for a disorder characterized by right-brain dominance. It is a world populated by figures of animism, metonym, metaphor, and synesthesia.

"Retreating Light": *The Wild Iris*

The Wild Iris offers a "persistent animism" in its placement of key thematic concerns in the voices of plants, and it brings its readers into a world of neuroatypicality expressed in poetic language almost immediately. In the first of the seven poems titled "Matins," the speaker alludes to and claims a "depressive" stance and establishes the credibility of the "plant voicing" begun in the preceding poem:

...Noah says
 depressives hate the spring, imbalance
 between the inner and the outer world. I make
 another case – being depressed, yes, but in a sense passionately
 attached to the living tree, my body actually curled in the split trunk, almost at peace....

...Noah says this is
 an error of depressives, identifying
 with a tree, whereas the happy heart
 wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for
 the part, not the whole.
 (Glück 2)

This first "Matins" is preceded in the work as a whole by a poem titled, and voiced by, "The Wild Iris," a piece that reads simultaneously as the (re)birth of a flower and the (re)turn from the depths of depression or the brink of suicide. Indeed, it is difficult to shake the sense of foreboding imposed by the lines of "The Wild Iris" as one enters "Matins" - and while this may be another "error of depressives," it is also key to understanding the work as a whole.

In the postmodern era, animism that "voices" plants faces the risk of being reduced to or dismissed as "mere" pathetic fallacy. This is particularly true if, as Savarese explores, the connection between an animistic understanding of the world and poetry is essentially a right-brained one, most accessible to neurotypical individuals during the pre-literate years of life--that is, in a state of childishness (285). The first "Matins," however, meets this concern head-on by dismissing both the speaker's depression and the reader's sense of foreboding in Noah's "breezy analysis": "Instead of ontology, the garden's resident ironist discerns psychology; instead of tragic insight, the symptomatic "presentation" of temperament or disease" (Gregerson 117). By anticipating the "left-brained" response, the poem builds an affinity between the speaker's emotional response and the reader's residual foreboding – a foreboding cleverly built by the very animism the argument of "Matins" underscores (117).

What is this animism? *The Wild Iris* begins with a poem of the same name, in which the speaker is the growing iris plant itself. Its topic is death and rebirth; but, in its treatment of this theme, the poem addresses the very anxieties that arise from the logical/emotional conflict:

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

“Whatever/returns from oblivion returns/to find a voice,” the wild iris reassures us. But we are not reassured. The terror of “surviv[ing]/as consciousness/buried in the dark earth” lingers. Rather than depression, we are left with an extraordinary anxiety. The first “Matins” justifies the intense mood only after the fact; for the time it takes to turn the page, at least, we occupy a right-brain-dominant world.

In this context, the speaker's retreat to the trunk of the “living tree” in the first “Matins” comes to the reader as a relief. It becomes even harder to take seriously the logic-bound, left-brained analysis that “identifying/with a tree” is “an error of depressives” (Glück 2). But is it true that “the happy heart/wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for/the part, not the whole” (2)?

“For a Pathetic Fallacy to cause much emotional reverberation,” Empson writes, “it must be imposed upon the reader by an ambiguity” (40). That is, the pathetic fallacy and the animistic spirit that imbues it should not be immediately obvious to the reader; according to Empson, such animism should be an effect the reader “falls into” rather than one the reader sees coming (40). Although there seems to be no attempt to conceal the “pathetic fallacy,” there is little attempt to reveal it, either; the title of “The Wild Iris” and the other plant-voiced poems that follow it. What results is an effect that does not so much surprise the reader into a pathetic fallacy than lead the reader into an understanding of the poems on their own emotional, fundamentally right-brained terms.

In “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” Roman Jakobson asserts that the two fundamental modes of communicating meaning are metaphor and metonymy (qtd in Chew). In the former, an association is made on the basis of a shared quality between the two things associated; the example Chew gives is the metaphor “Achilles is a lion,” which intends to link the two named entities on the basis of shared strength, courage, or ferocity. In the latter, an association is made on the basis of a shared *contiguity* between the two named entities; in Chew's example, the association of Achilles with Brad Pitt, because the latter was cast to portray the former in the film version of the *Iliad*.

Both metaphor and metonymy can be used to explain, organize, or illustrate the world by resolving two or more meanings into a single statement (Empson 48). Both, however, impose some level of ambiguity, as does all figurative language. This ambiguity, and thus the field of things encompassed in the association that are *not* stated, increases when the words used to build a metaphoric or metonymic association can be understood both in their associated sense and “simply as words in their acquired sense” (2). It looms largest when the intended association between the two named entities is not stated. Instead, “two statements are made as if they were connected, and the reader is forced to consider their relations for himself” (Empson 25). By equating two concepts, metaphor and metonymy confront the reader with an objective relation, rather than by presenting an analysis or a direct statement (2).

Metaphor and metonymy provide a means of organizing one's world and of communicating one's place in the world to others (R.J. Savarese 275). Yet when the ambiguity imposed by the stated-but-not-explained relationship is too great, the reader is left bewildered. Such is the case in the third of the seven "Matins" poems in *The Wild Iris*:

...I cannot love
 what I can't conceive, and you disclose
 virtually nothing: are you like the hawthorn tree,
 always the same thing in the same place,
 or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent, first springing up
 a pink spike on the slope behind the daisies,
 and the next year, purple in the rose garden? You must see
 it is useless to us, this silence that promotes belief
 you must be all things, the foxglove and the hawthorn tree,
 the vulnerable rose and tough daisy – we are left to think
 you couldn't possibly exist....
 (Glück 12)

Here, the reader of the poem is not left baffled by the author's associations; rather, the speaker of the poem is left baffled by the call to associate the flowers in the garden with an absent God, one who confronts the speaker with an apparent objective relations, the existence of flowers, without bothering to analyze or explain. The ambiguity, in the speaker's mind, is absolute. Although she feels there *ought* to be a connection, that "the garden cannot simply be, the garden must *mean*," there is nothing but the facts of the flowers to indicate there *actually is* a meaning (Davis 121). Are we to heed the call of the left brain not to see associations where they are not analyzed or explained, "to think/you couldn't possibly exist"? Or do we return to the right-brained, animistic, associative "faith"?

If the God of *The Wild Iris* is incomprehensible through metaphor, he is equally unapproachable via metonymy. In the first of the ten poems titled "Vespers," the speaker attempts to establish an association via contiguity:

Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree.
 Here, in Vermont, country
 of no summer. It was a test: if the tree lived,
 it would mean you existed.
 (Glück 36)

Here, the speaker is not attempting to see God *in* the fig tree on the basis of some shared quality, the way she once attempted to divine God's qualities via the staidness of the hawthorn tree or the inconsistency of the foxglove. Instead, she links the life of the tree to the existence of God via a third means: "you exist/exclusively in warmer climates" (36). The "part" of a useful summer crop represented by the fig tree comes to stand in for the "whole" that is the divine presence. "Perhaps/they see your face in Sicily," laments the speaker; "here, we barely see/the hem of your garment" (36).

In *The Wild Iris*, metaphor and metonymy do not contribute to the narrative of the poem so much as to their argument. Actual examples of metaphor and metonymy are relatively rare, although a sample appears in the fifth of the ten "Vespers" poems: "...until the twilight makes/lamps of the first lilies" (Glück 42). Although the use of associations as a rhetorical device imposes a particularly dense ambiguity on the reader, it is an ambiguity that is psychologically meaningful to the understanding of the poems. By experiencing the attempts and failures to "join up" two parts of an association, the reader not only encounters the human speaker's theological difficulties and the despair they invoke, but actually *feels* it – a situation

that implies a powerful potential for poetic language to serve as an entry into neuroatypical modes of thought.

Metaphors may be described as “the synesthesia of several units of observation into one commanding image” (Empson 2). Synesthesia occurs when “apprehension in terms of one of the senses is described in terms of, or compared with, one of the others” (Empson 13). In neurology, the name refers to a condition in which sensory input which would seem to be accessible only to one of the senses is *actually perceived* by two or more senses at once (Spector and Maurer 108). The most commonly-reported form is “color-grapheme” synesthesia, in which letters or numbers are perceived as having specific colors; however, associations between any two or three other senses have also been reported (108). Although experiences of synesthesia are not linked to any one form of neuroatypicality, incidences of synesthesia appear to be higher in certain neurodiverse populations, including in persons with autism and depression (108). Poetically, synesthesia operates to conflate sensory modes, intensifying meaning in a single word or phrase while also imposing an ambiguous space in which meaning may dwell without disclosure.

In *The Wild Iris*, the plants serve as the primary synesthetes, connecting sensory details to bodily experience in a number of ways. “Trillium” opens by connecting the visual sensation of light to the tactile:

When I woke up I was in a forest. The dark
seemed natural, the sky through the pine trees
thick with many lights.

Later in the same poem, the trillium connects visual and auditory experiences more subtly:

I think if I speak long enough
I will answer that question, I will see
whatever they see, a ladder

reaching through the firs, whatever
calls them to exchange their lives--
(Glück 4).

Here, the auditory experience of speaking, of hearing “whatever/calls,” is intertwined with sight. If the trillium “speak[s] long enough,” it will “see/whatever they see” - a sight with sound, one that “calls.”

Immediately following the sight/sound and sight/tactile associations constructed by the trillium, the voice of the lamium sets up one of the most vivid and most synesthetic similes in the entire work:

...I feel it
glinting through the leaves, erratic,
like someone hitting the side of a glass with a metal spoon.
(Glück 5).

The initial sensory experience of the sunlight is tactile, one that the lamium “feel[s].” This tactile experience is consistent both with the opening of the poem, which describes the lamium’s “cold heart” and “trailing over cool rock,” as well as with the lamium’s own comment that it rarely sees the sun: “leaves grow over it, completely hiding it” (5). The lamium instead feels the sunlight “glinting,” a visual descriptor, and “hitting the side of a glass with a metal spoon,” a jarring image that is at once auditory and tactile.

Just as associative thinking functions rhetorically in *The Wild Iris*, so does sensory experience – in at least one case. In the second poem titled “Matins,” the human speaker opens with these lines:

Unreachable father, when we were first
exiled from heaven, you made
a replica, a place *in one sense*
different from heaven, being
designed to teach a lesson....
(Glück 3)(emphasis added).

The use of the word “sense” here imposes an ambiguity. In context, it may be read both as “in one meaning” and “in one *mode of sensation*” - here, primarily visual, as the poem relies heavily on this theme, mentioning not only “darkness,” “dark red,” and “flesh colored” but also “the first tears/filling our eyes” (3).

Empson says of synesthesia, “It throws back the reader upon the undifferentiated affective states which are all that such sensations have in common...and may actually induce a sort of rudimentary disorder into his modes of sensation” (13). Although Empson describes poetic synesthesia, his statement implies a potentially useful mode for the synesthetic: one that can recreate a fundamentally neurological experience in the mind of the reader.

“Justice is Pure”: *Autobiography of Red*

Like *The Wild Iris*, Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* relies on a number of sensory and perceptive shifts, developed via language, to telegraph both what is said in the text and what cannot be said but only *meant*. A revoicing of the *Geryoneis* (the Geryon Matter) of Stesichoros, *Autobiography of Red* in fact opens with a line from Gertrude Stein: “I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to do” (Carson 3). Through the use of the same poetic figures that populate *The Wild Iris*, *Autobiography of Red* does as it wants to do and as it has to do: the text draws the reader into an alternate sensory world.

While *The Wild Iris* handles animism, the “voicing” of flowering plants, with a careful distance that remains mindful of the accusation of pathetic fallacy, *Autobiography of Red* pulls the reader into a living world with no apparent consciousness that there's anything questionable about it. In Chapter I, “Justice,” we are introduced to a young Geryon for whom living objects are just as real as living people, or perhaps more:

...he studied stones as he trotted along behind.
So many different kinds of stones,
the sober and the uncanny, lying side by side in the red dirt.
(Carson 23).

Throughout his childhood, Geryon continues to occupy a world in which everything lives. The “new ending” to his first written autobiography, which originally ended with Geryon's death, does not mention either Geryon or Herakles at all. Instead, this new, “happy” ending notes only that “All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand/in hand” (38). As Geryon begins to create his photographic autobiography, however, his animistic world begins to drop away. This transition, fittingly, is summed up by a description of a photograph in which animistic behavior plays a key role, in “Mitwelt”:

The last page of his project
was a photograph of his mother's rosebush under the kitchen window.
Four of the roses were on fire.
They stood up straight and pure on the stalk, gripping the dark like prophets

and howling colossal intimacies from the back of their fused throats....
(Carson 84).

At this moment, Geryon's animistic world and his passion for photography fuse; he is lost in the memory of both, jarred back to reality only by the feeling of "something solid/land[ing] against his back" (84).

The memory of the roses also provides one of the most overt instances of synesthesia in *Autobiography of Red*. The seventh-grade science project that results in the photograph of the howling roses begins when Geryon "began to wonder about the noise that colors make":

Roses came
roaring across the garden at him.
He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against
the window screen. Most
of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit they did not hear
the cries of the roses
being burned alive in the noonday sun. *Like horses*, Geryon would say helpfully,
like horses in war. No, they shook their heads.
Why is grass called blades? he asked them. *Isn't it because of the clicking?*
They stared at him. *You should be*
interviewing roses not people, said the science teacher. Geryon liked this idea.
(Carson 84).

Savarese notes that, for many neuroatypical writers, maintaining this kind of animistic perception works as a "refusal to allow language, in the words of [Dawn] Prince, to "cut up the world" or "cut groups of people from one another" (284). Rather than ordering the world into "self" and "other" through "a process of condescending classification," writing that insists on including animistic and synesthetic views of the world insists on preserving a pre-literacy experience of language that "does not congeal or colonize" (R.J. Savarese 284).

Unlike in *The Wild Iris*, where both animism and synesthesia are deployed carefully and separately from the voice of the human speaker herself, in *Autobiography of Red* both are integrated wholly into Geryon's experience from the start. It is not until Geryon begins school that "justice" appears and "the world drops away," signaling to Geryon once again that his experience of the world is not shared by others. It is a signal that recalls the production of Geryon's first written autobiography, in which his mother and teacher lament that he cannot seem to tell a story with a happy ending. Geryon's alternate ending for the written autobiography persists in capturing his animistic and synesthetic view of the world, but it is not a conventional happy ending in any sense (Carson 37-8). When language and the rationality of science refuse to produce a common ground for Geryon and others to connect, he resorts to photography. in an attempt to tell his story more clearly.

For many neuroatypical individuals, "language is stripped down to its essentials, to nouns and verbs and adjectives"; it is "a continuous difficult poem steeped in metaphors, verbal echoes, word play" (Chew). This does not mean that it is difficult for neuroatypical individuals to master. Rather, it opens language in a different direction, suggesting possibilities in meaning, placement, and play that do not always make themselves recognizable in a more conventional context.

This experience of language permeates *Autobiography of Red*. Indeed, the book's proemium, "Red Meat: What Difference did Stesichoros Make?" warns the reader that this is precisely the case – although like many of the functions of the text, this one does not become clear until after the fact and perhaps even while read "in reverse," the way we may or may not meet Stesichoros "on our way back" through the logic of Appendix C.

In the proemium, we are introduced to Stesichoros, who “came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet” (Carson 4). But scarcely is Stesichoros introduced than we are thrown into a discussion of adjectives that echoes Chew's description of neuroatypical language: “Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else.... They are the latches of being” (4).

Before Stesichoros, we are told, adjectives were firmly “latched” to their various nouns. By way of example, the passage describes Homer's consistent use of adjectives in metaphor: blood is “black,” women are “neat-ankled,” and death is simply “bad” (4). Homer's metaphors constitute a “fixed diction,” in which the code (language) is more important than the substance it carries (meaning). Stesichoros, however, is said to have switched the direction of these priorities.

While the world before Stesichoros was clearly metaphoric, the “unlatched” world in which “all the substances in the world went floating up” is metonymic and synesthetic. Horses become “hollow-hooved,” children are “bruiseless,” and killings are “cream black,” adopting simultaneously a visual element, a tactile element, and an olfactory/gustatory element. (5)

Unlatched adjectives float throughout *Autobiography of Red*, reinforcing the synesthetic element through a constant interplay of metaphor and metonymy. In the school where Geryon attends kindergarten, the main corridor “was/a hundred thousand miles/of thunder tunnels and indoor neon sky slammed open by giants” (24). When Geryon is left to navigate this expanse of bright lights and percussive sound, the connections between the space and his proprioceptive understanding of it become too intense to bear:

Main Door rose before him. Perhaps-
peering hard Geryon made his way through the fires in his mind to where
the map should be.

In place of a map of the school corridor lay a deep glowing blank.

Geryon's anger was total.

The blank caught fire and burned to baseline. Geryon ran.

After that Geryon went to school alone.

He did not approach Main Door at all.

(Carson 24)

One has difficulty imagining Homer, or another classical poet in his vein, describing an “indoor neon sky slammed open by giants” or a “deep glowing blank” in one's memory, much less one that would “burn to baseline.” It is only in this world of free-floating adjectives, unlatched from their classical forms, in which Geryon's experience can begin to be transmitted.

Just as there is “nothing to interfere” in this world with the free association of adjectives and the nouns they describe in Stesichoros's “unlatched” world, there is also nothing to interfere with the flexibility of prepositions to “re-map” the perceived world. To Stesichoros, insomniacs are not only sleepless; they are “outside the joy” (5). In the next section, “Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros,” this alternate ordering of the world indicated by freer preposition use continues into the first fragment with “Geryon's dream began red then slipped out of the vat and ran/*Upsail* broke silver shot up *through* his roots like a pup” (9)(emphasis added). Similar “remappings” of space and body appear throughout the central text of *Autobiography of Red*; one example appears in the chapter titled “Walls,” in which Geryon notes that “up on the overpass/the night was wide open/and blowing headlights like a sea” (55).

“Or If Not Not”: Ambiguity

The results of these sensory and perceptive shifts in *Autobiography of Red* are best summed up in the unfolding of Appendix C, “Clearing Up the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen” (Carson 18). Appendix C adopts the language and format of logic by presenting its premises in a numbered, “if-then” format. At first, this format looks comfortably left-brained:

1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not.

2. If Stesichoros was a blind man either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent.

3. If Stesichoros' blindness was a temporary condition this condition either had a contingent cause or it had none.
(Carson 18).

Appendix C continues to reason in the same if-then format, arguing that Stesichoros may have made a “strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct,” leading to his being blinded by Helen, and “either this remark was a lie or it was not” (19). But then the reasoning takes a noticeably odd turn:

10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back.

...

13. If Stesichoros lies either we will know at once that he is lying or we will be fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out.
(Carson 19).

If this line of “reasoning” begins to feel like the inside of Alice's Looking-Glass, it is by design (or it is not). The same distortions in sensory perception that affect reasoning in Lewis Carroll's imaginary world are at play here, with similar results. The “altered” language of the poem induces an altered and expanded sense of reality, language, and logic. If we are in fact “in reverse,” the placement of Appendix C *before* the “Novel in Verse” that situates us within the “whole landscape [that] looks inside out,” rather than after it, makes an odd sense.

“The question of Stesichoros' blinding by Helen” is never cleared up at all – at least, not in the lockstep logical sense in which the enterprise claims to begin. Instead, we are left with a deep sense of ambiguity about the whole thing. Appendix C ends with the confident assertion “If Stesichoros is a blind man we will lie or if not not,” but the reader has no such confidence: *is* Stesichoros a blind man? Does it matter, since the “logic” of the final assertion demands a denial of Stesichoros' blindness in either case? But if the final assertion demands a denial of Stesichoros' blindness in either case, have we “cleared up” anything at all?

In *The Wild Iris*, the human speaker is similarly full of questions. In the second “Matins,” she notes that while she, John, and Noah at least have been given “beauty/without alternative,” “we didn't know what was the lesson” (Glück 3). In the third “Matins,” the speaker's sense of absence and lapses in logic resolves itself into a question:

...we are left to think
 you couldn't possibly exist. Is this
 what you mean us to think, does this explain
 the silence of the morning,
 the crickets not yet rubbing their wings, the cats
 not fighting in the yard?

(Glück 12).

The fifth “Matins” begins and ends with a question: “You want to know how I spend my time? ...Or was the point always/to continue without a sign?” (25)

By the time the “Vespers” cycle begins, the speaker has abandoned questions in favor of assumptions without logic. In the first of the ten “Vespers” poems, the speaker plants a fig tree “Here, in Vermont, country/of no summer” (36). It is a test, phrased in the same if/then format that characterizes Appendix C: “if the tree lived,/it would mean you existed.” When the speaker notes that “By this logic, you do not exist,” the unspoken conclusion is that the tree did not survive. Yet even this “logic” cannot resolve the speaker's uncertainties; after noting the conclusion of the fig tree experiment, the speaker goes on to contemplate the possibility that God does exist “exclusively in warmer climates,” where fig trees can thrive (36). Like the question of Stesichoros's blinding by Helen, the question of whether God exists cannot be answered, and attempting to approach it by logical gateways only deposits the logician back where she started.

If Glück's human speaker is unable to approach certainty, the God of *The Wild Iris* seems even less able to do so. “I cannot go on/restricting myself to images,” he declares at the end of his first appearance in *The Wild Iris*, “Clear Morning”: “I am prepared now to force/clarity upon you” (8). Yet the human denizens of the garden never achieve this clarity. In “Retreating Light,” the God-speaker approaches the limitations of language as a way of explanation:

...I told you, write your own story.

After all those years of listening,
I thought you'd know
what a story was.

...Then I realized you couldn't think
with any real boldness or passion;
you hadn't had your own lives yet,
your own tragedies.
So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies,
because apparently tools alone weren't enough.

(Glück 50). Yet even God finds himself limited. The humans he has provided with tools and tragedies do not actually develop into independent tale-tellers:

You will never know how deeply
it pleases me to see you sitting there
like independent beings,
to see you dreaming by the open window,
holding the pencils I gave you....

And I am free to do as I please now,
to attend to other things, in confidence
you have no need of me anymore.

(Glück 50-1).

The betrayal is contained entirely in the word “like.” As Gregerson notes, “Those who achieve authentic independence require no 'like'” (118). Here, the pencils as tools of written language stand in for language itself, but the separating, categorizing, and compartmentalizing nature of language remains. Just as *Autobiography of Red* captures Geryon's apprehension of

the limitations of language and its inability to connect him with others, here the humans with their pencils are equally incapable of connecting via language to God, who pats himself on the back for having provided the “tools,” “lives,” and “tragedies” necessary to tale-telling without realizing that his creations are simply modeling independence: they have produced no named creation, and it appears this God would miss it if they did.

“Being a Soul and Unable to Speak”: Poetry as Communication

The Wild Iris and *Autobiography of Red* present two distinct approaches to neurodivergence. The former displaces the experience of neuroatypicality, while the latter embraces it. *The Wild Iris* seems to embrace depression, but the ironic voice also displaces it; throughout the cycle, the reader is encouraged to sympathize with the human speaker in the garden but not necessarily to empathize with her. *Autobiography of Red*, on the other hand, places the reader directly in the head of its “monstrous” protagonist, encouraging not only empathy but identification with Geryon and the poetic language that comprises his experience.

The nascent “neurodiversity” movement understands neurological differences merely as normal human variation and seeks to embrace the differing experiences and perspectives on the world that various types of neuroatypicality produce (E.T. Savarese 101). Emily Thornton Savarese writes, “With an understanding of neurodiversity, strengths can be accentuated, and the world can be altered to naturally support a full range of neurologies” (101). Kristina Chew argues that understanding neurodivergent language poetically may open the door to greater understanding and communication. Ralph James Savarese goes even further, arguing that poetic, neurodivergent language creates “a kind of political or ethical proprioception that not only contests typical arrangements of power and identity but reconfigures them as well” (R.J. Savarese 283). In the play of animistic perception, synesthesia, metaphor, and metonymy in Tito Mukhopadhyay’s *The Mind Tree*, Savarese sees a staunch refusal to allow language to “cut up the world” or “cut groups of people from one another,” in the words of autistic anthropologist Dawn Prince-Hughes (284). This language maps a new relationship to the world and among individuals even as it resists “a process of condescending classification” (283). “With Tito,” Savarese writes, again quoting *The Mind Tree*, “language steps lightly, provisionally; it neither masters nor replaces the object it names” (286). By using the language as a guide to destabilizing and ultimately dissolving boundaries between “self” and “other,” poetry may offer a guide to neuroatypicality that embraces rather than pathologizes difference.

To many neuroatypical writers, “language is written about as a thing foreign and external, separated and broken off, from the subject” (Chew). It is an “alien being” that must nevertheless be mastered if there is to be any connection, any interface, between the writer and the world. In this “torn-away” space, lyric becomes not only an expedient, but a necessity; it becomes a means to communicate with, and within, “a world that is often quite hostile to the neurological other” (R.J. Savarese 276). In *The Wild Iris*, the human speaker resorts to lyric introspection to deal with the pervasive disquiet of her situation, “imbalance/between the inner and the outer world” (Glück 2). It is an imperfect dealing, dealing “in a sense,” “almost”; regardless of her longing, the speaker remains consigned to a narrative, one for which she has been given no “map” to meaning (2). The plants in the garden exist almost exclusively in a lyric mode, and while the human speaker attempts to join them, her sense of separation remains profound. In *Autobiography of Red*, lyric navigates a similar space between the need for a mapped narrative and the terror of it that pulls the protagonist into a lyric space: the young Geryon, unable to create a mental “map” of his school that would allow him to navigate its imposing front doors and impossible hallways, nevertheless finds a moment of respite in the lyric final lines of “Justice,” “while the first snows of winter/floated down on his eyelashes and covered the branches around him and

silenced/all trace of the world” (Carson 25). Unable either to come to left-brained, neurotypical terms with the demands of narrative or to surrender wholly to the wordless predawn of lyric, *The Wild Iris* end with a lullaby; *Autobiography of Red*, in photographs.

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