Journal of Ecohumanism
January 2023
Volume: 2, No: 1, pp. 93 – 108
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/ecohumanism

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 27 July 2022 Accepted: 24 October 2022
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v2i1.2740

Empathy with Nature and an Autistic Spirituality

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Abstract

Anna Stenning does in the anthology Neurodiversity. A New Critical Paradigm (2020) introduce an autistic ethics using the autobiographies of Greta Thunberg (No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference (2019)) and Temple Grandin (Animals in Translation (2005)). Stenning points to how this autistic ethics do expand its acts of care to the more-than-human. Grandin describes her being in the world as more attuned to animals than humans. Thunberg argues that her Asperger's is the reason why she can care so totally for the climate. This article further investigates the intersection of autism and the more-than-human, or the post humanist. Using the works of openly autistic authors Madeleine Ryan (A Room Called Earth (2020)) and Hannah Emerson (You Are Helping This Great Universe Explode (2020)) as well as Emily Dickinson, posthumously diagnosed with autism. I investigate the autistic theme of nature and the autistic relationship to other species. This relation often seems to be stronger and more genuine than the relation to other humans. I propose that the autistic sense of the more-than-human is at once a response to the oppressive view of the autistic as less-than-human – a way of finding one's allies outside the realms of human civilization – and a special kind of autistic worldly spiritualness that includes an ethics that do not segregate one life form from another.

Keywords: *Neurodivergence; empathy; autistic spirituality*

> I read and read. When I read, I am no longer human. I don't have to be. Written language may be typically human, but it doesn't have to be neurotypical. I read and I become a tree. I read and I become a cat. My allies have never been humans. I like people better through their texts than through their presence. During the assessment, the doctor said that social issues are fundamental to an autism diagnosis. But I don't have a problem with social. I am social with my cats and my books, all the time. I don't need others.

This paper uses an autoethnographic approach to examine the reading experience of an autistic reader (me), and how this connects to an experience of a more-than-human world. Parts of the article are made up of my reading diaries – these diary entries are marked in the layout as indent paragraphs. I read as an autistic reader. My reading is not about diagnosing, but about what Christa Mullis (2019) calls "autistic coding," which means that autistic readers experience characters (or in my case, the texts themselves, the language) as "moving like us," regardless of the author's intent. I read texts that are overtly autistic, or that have been interpreted as autistic by other autistic readers. The autoethnographic aspect implies an "epistemology of insider perspective" (Adams et al, 2015) – but as my inquiry concerns a

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number of readings, it straddles the line between the experienced and the analysed. I move between my own feelings and thoughts, and the academic and activist neuroqueer context of which I am a part. My investigation will be emotionally argumentative. Openness with this is thus central. I argue that my autistic reading is relevant to an ecocritical and posthumanist approach to life. I hope to find traces of a movement that transcends the human.

Purposes

The purpose of this paper is to explore, through a reading of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Hannah Emerson, and the prose of Madeleine Ryan, how an autistic perspective on the world can be expressed as and through a form of secular spiritualism. Anna Stenning examines the autobiographies of Greta Thunberg and Temple Grandin and reads them through a neuroqueer as well as posthumanist and ecocritical perspective - the ethics and morality that Thunberg and Grandin emphasize are directed at the more-than-human; animals in Grandin's case, the climate in Thunberg's - and it is uncompromising. This means that autistic being in the world implies an ethics that embraces not only other humans but also non-human animals and things. This is in line with posthumanist and ecocritical perspectives. Applying an autistic grid to this form of morality means that the anthropocentric is understood as a neurotypical approach, while the autistic person's experience of the world is closer to a different way of understanding what life is and how it is expressed.

The (Non-)Borders Of Empathy

Stenning makes clear in her examination of an autistic ethic that that autism is defined by empathy deficits and the related ideas of an absent Theory of Mind. This has been used to suggest that autistic people are not fully moral, and autistic people have been denied characteristics of what it is to be *fully human*, including empathy, morality, and a sense of self (Stenning, 2020). Human nature thus appears to be somewhat conditional - based on how well one meets certain requirements for neurotypical responses. This is a political aspect of the autistic experience, which shares many aspects with a posthumanist feminism. Rosi Braidotti states that in the political economy of phallologocentrism and of anthropocentric humanism, Sameness is regarded as a universalistic mode, and everyone whose sex is not male, thus fall on the side of 'Otherness,' which is understood as being worth-less-than. The deleuzian concept of becoming-animal/becoming-world, that Braidotti use for her nomadic ethics does, as Braidotti puts it: "speak to my feminist self, partly because my gender, historically speaking, *never quite made it into full humanity*, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted" (Braidotti, 2006, 130, my italics). Braidotti questions humanity as such, and humanity being seen as the most desirable thing. She also shows how loyalty to one's own species, to humanity, is not always self-evident, when humanity does not want to include everyone. Like autistics, women and non-binary people have not been seen as fully human. For autistic non-males, this becomes doubly apparent. In what follows, I want to explore how the autistic person, who "never quite made it into full humanity", might instead choose other allies.

Stenning notes that within the field of autistic life writing, several authors have engaged with moral issues within environmental and interspecies ethics (Stenning, 2020, 110). This could be read as a possibility, in line with Braidotti's choice of allegiance. But Stenning also points out a risk with reading neurodivergent people as closer to nature or as bearers of an ethic that embraces the non-human: "The idea that autistics may experience greater environmental

empathy may contribute to the 'othering' of neurodivergent people, through the assumption that we are somehow closer to nature than those who consider themselves to be neurotypical" (Stenning, 2020, 110). This, I mean, says more about the idea of the autonomous neurotypical than about the neurodivergent. It says something about the neurotypical's anxious relationship to the human, to the risk of falling out of humanity – a humanity neurodivergent people have always known to be conditional. As an autistic author and academic, I read about the ethical autistic person with an affirmative gaze. This affirmative gaze can at the same time be critical. I see the risk of reading as less-than-human but choose to read more-than-human. I choose to read humanity as a limitation, and deal with my sense of "othering" with an embrace.

Animals in Translation. The Woman who thinks like a Cow (2005) an autobiographical book by autistic researcher Temple Grandin has become central to the understanding (and possibly misunderstanding) of autism and autistic people's relationship with animals. Grandin (along with neurotypical neuropsychiatrist Catherine Johnson) writes about how she understands animals, animal emotions and how animals perceive the world in a very particular way. Grandin describes her relationship with animals as self-evident: "It took me a long time to figure out that I see things about animals other people don't" (1).

> I read Grandin and Johnson's book (and I write clearly that this autobiography has a psychiatrist as co-author, as neurotypical translator of Grandin) and I think about how understanding so easily becomes a freakshow. I talk to my autistic researcher friend about the book, as a book for neurotypical readers who want to grasp an autistic brain well enough to be fascinated. She's upset, feeling as if the autistic person is the animal that needs to be translated. I understand her. At the same time, I read the text as an autistic person. I recognize myself. I feel the community with non-human animals more strongly than that with humans. And I want to continue to feel that way. Grandin writes: "Animals saved me" (4), "I got through my teenage years thanks to my squeeze machine [a device invented by Grandin herself that hugs her with a steady pressure over her body, unlike the limp and uncomfortable hugs of humans that she can't stand] and my horses. Animals kept me going." (5) And I want to let the animals save the humans – instead of the humans having the power to decide which animals are worth saving and which are not. And I want to believe in that special connection - the one that is ethical, empathetic, spiritual. For me, the text has never been human. As soon as I learned to read and write, text was an alternative to humans. Text is closer to nature and animals than to the social interactions people engage in. I am writing to my autistic friend: I like you as a person, but I like you better as a text. She understands exactly.

When I read Dickinson, Emerson and Ryan, my reading always ends up in a kind of state where I merge with the text. Similarly, all three authors (and in Dickinson's case, those who have researched her life) depict how they, or their characters and lyrical subjects, merge with the world. This, in the words of autism researcher Stephen Shore, can be expressed as "fusing". In *Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome* (2003), Shore reports how whenever he gets a strong emotion, he must consider whether someone he is in communication with is displaying a similar emotion, which he is picking up from them. He writes: "Sometimes I feel as if I am fused with that other person's emotions and can't separate myself" (Shore, 2003, 37). This feeling of incapacity to "separate oneself" does, on the one

hand, confirm the prejudice of autistics lacking self-hood, on the other hand, it functions as a protest against the very idea of human individuality.

Reading about Dickinson, it becomes obvious that much of her life can be interpreted as "fusing", as well as attempts to protect herself from unpleasant ones. She feels the nation's suffering in her body. She feels the condition of things, feels empathy for things. She feels the people – through their things and places. Wendy Martin describes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson* (2007) how the city of Boston for Dickinson was a "city of the dead" (2007, 7) because of its history of civil war. It is a way of feeling the suffering of others in one's body. Other aspects of Dickinson's poetry concern the pain of animals during the hunt. One poem opens a sense of death as a physical experience, an ecstasy that affects physically, not only the deer but also the reader and writer:

> A wounded deer leaps highest,
>
> I've heard the hunter tell;
>
> 'Tis but the ecstasy of death,
>
> And then the brake is still.
>
> The smitten rock that gushes,
>
> The trampled steel that springs:
>
> A cheek is always redder
>
> Just where the hectic stings!
>
> Mirth is the mail of anguish,
>
> In which it caution arm,
>
> Lest anybody spy the blood
>
> And "You're hurt" exclaim! (*Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 2016*,* 2)

Dickinson writes about alliances with the more-than-living, about the pain of death that is simultaneously ecstatic. The empathy is built on a "!", on the exclamation points of vulnerability.

I read "fusing" as a way of practicing ethics. It is a being that goes beyond the individual subject – that completely rejects the idea of an autonomous individual. Ryan's novel, *A Room Called Earth*, takes place over the course of an evening, during a party and the preparations for a party. But the bulk of the text consists of the autistic first-person's reflections on her life and the world. In one episode she reflects on Australia, the country she lives in, and how, as a white person, she can (or can't) live in that colonial country.

> So before I fall asleep each night, Lisa Bellear tells me about the history of this land and her people. I want to do everything I can to honour them, and their history,

> because, unlike New Zealand, America and Canada, Australia has no treaty with its Indigenous population. That weren't even legally recognised citizens until 1967. [...] I always feel intimidated when I cross paths with them. I don't know how to build a bridge between who I am and who they are. Whenever I see an aboriginal person I immediately feel out of place and ridiculous. It seems so absurd that I'm here. Surely I'm meant to be flouncing about somewhere tepid in the Northern Hemisphere, making daisy chains and milking cows. (Ryan, 2020, 21)

Ryan's first-person narrator feels a strong need to articulate her feeling for the indigenous people, it is an ethical imperative that is written out – which becomes a call to the reader to "check your privileges," but more than that; it becomes an existential situation where one's own existence becomes absurd – the self is questioned, existence is presented as far from self-evident. The structures of society are criticized and become existential conditions. All based on emotion – an emotion that allows these reflections.

Other **Aspects Of Ethics**

Danijela Petković and Dušica Ljubinković use, in an analysis of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* – a novel using reinterpretations of Plato, and astrology to form a story and a philosophy on the border of humanity - Anat Pick's term "creaturely ethics" as well as its opposites in order to understand the ethics, and empathy, that the protagonist Duszejko forms during throughout the novel Petković & Ljubinković, 2022, 89). Pick means that "a creaturely ethics […] does not depend on fulfilling any preliminary criteria of subjectivity and personhood. Its source lies in the recognition of the materiality and vulnerability of all living bodies, whether human or not" (Pick, 2011, 193). And Duszejko argues for the rights of animals that depends "not [on] the animals' materiality and vulnerability to death shared with humans (which ought to create solidarity and abolish species-based hierarchies), but [on] the "spark of brightness", or the soul common to all living beings" (Petković & Ljubinković, 2022, 89). Duszejko talks of the "spark" as something that creates a bond between the individual soul and the Earth: "As it [the spark] passes the Moon, it gains something as intangible as the soul. Only then does it fall to Earth, and is immediately clothed in a body. Human, animal or vegetable. That's the way it is" (Tokarczuk, 2019, 219). Tokarczuk's novel does not specifically refer to neurodivergence or non-typicality – even though I would argue that it is certainly possible to read her protagonists as divergent – but she argues for, as Petković and Ljubinković points out, a kind of ethics that is spiritual as well as exceeding the borders of humanity. The "spark" Duszejko experiences, is similar to Ryan's, Dickinson's and Emerson's relations to a world that embrace them.

Dominique Sellier uses Félix Guattari's and Arne Næss' theories of ecosophy to form a "Post-Colonial Ecohumanism of the City" (2022). Here, the inseparability of political-ethical and the subjective – as well as the love for nature and the love for one self becomes evident. Guattari argues for an "ethical-political articulation between the three ecological registers: the environment, social relations and human subjectivity" (Guattari, 2000, 28), while Næss links ecosophy also to "self-realization, the possibility of seeing God face to face, of achieving moksha (liberation)" (Næss, 2005, 28). For Sellier, these aspects makes it "possible to reconcile a modernist philosophy of individual and collective emancipation and deployment of subjectivities in the city, the idea of universalism with a world citizenship, with an emerging philosophy of respect and ethic for the living" (Sellier, 2022, 109). While I am not primarily

interested in the city or citizenship, aspects of my readings concern how cities in themselves can be a kind of subjects, though what I find most useful in Sellier's, Guattari's and Næss' thoughts is how they link a kind of self-love, to a wider notion of love for the world, in a context where the ethical or political is never possible to separate from the subjective. This collapse of the individual into the universal is something I will continue to investigate through a neurodivergent lens.

Specifically on neurodivergence – though not ethics or empathy – Kelin Loe writes of haptic rhetoricity as a link between the more-than-human and the neurodivergent (Loe, 2017, 41). Loe states that "the 'anthro' of anthropocentrism isn't open to all humanity equally [...] Speechless animals. Disabled humans. A history of dehumanizing racial groups through claims of a lack of intelligence. The combination of these forces acting against the life of human and nonhuman animals every time 'dumb' is reiterated." (41). Loe further propose resisting anthropocentrism in order to habilitate both nonhuman and animalized human animals using what she calls a haptic rhetoricity. She states that she "take[s] 'haptics' to mean sensations involving touch and feeling originating both inside and outside the skin" (2017, 42), following Diane Davis's notion of rhetoricity as the "affectability or persuadability " that comes with "the exposedness of corporeal existence" (Davies, 2011, 89). Rhethorics, in Loe and Davies understanding, thus becomes something ethical (or empathetical) – through the affectability and the exposedness. The view of rhethorics as part of an ethical approach to the world affects neurodivergent people since the rhethorics of neurodivergence differs from that of the neurotypical: Remi Yergeau defines neuroqueer rhethorics as a rhetoric that "stims, a rhetoric that faux pas, a rhetoric that averts eye contact, a rhetoric that lobs theories about ToM [Theory of Mind] against the wall" (Yergeau, 2018, 31). This neuroqueer rhethoric is the effect of the neurodivergent subject being spoken about as an object, being made into a rhetorical phenomenon. Loe's haptic rhetoricity is a way, I suggest to "faux pas" and "lobs theories about ToM against the wall" – exactly through being responsive to the more-than-human aspects of corporeality and relations to the world.

The Non-Human Or Humanity As A Species You Cannot Understand

Ryan writes about Animals:

> Connection with my own species has been difficult. I'm more at ease with the animal part of myself than the human part of myself. I feel at peace when I'm with Porkchop [her cat]. (2020, 4)

She describes a closeness to animals that is beyond the human. Human interaction is characterised by a distance. Humans, in Ryan's perspective clearly become a species, one of many. And it is not obvious to be connected to this species. I write in my diary:

> I read with Zlatan. Zlatan is my cat. She is lying next to the book on the table. We have an existence filled with routine. It's a different time. It's a different priority when she's around. She knows how to enjoy life. I'm learning about sex through Zlatan. I've never liked sex with people. Not even with myself. But Zlatan lies on my legs on the couch, the white fluffy blanket between my skin and her paws, and she scratch-walks with her front paws on the blanket. Drilling her claws in. Spinning loud, loud. And it's an orgasmic feeling, and I feel it with her.

Autistic non-speaking poet Emerson writes about animals and the animal ways of hearing, which are closer to her than human hearing. She writes about a hearing that exposes existence. The senses constitute the boundary of the subject, but with the particular (autistic or non-human) hearing, it implies a kind of boundless, complex, agency.

I hear great trying free sounds that you

do not hear yes it is

hard to try to live trying to hear the way

I do and you go listen

to me really hard to hear both at the same

time. I hear the vibrations

of your thoughts. I hear helpful plants

grow to the sun. I hear

the sun rays of healing light becoming

life freedom to breathe

life into hopeful life. I hear

the vibrations of fear

coming from everyone holding fear

in their mussy lives

of nothing life. I hear you trying to help

me great teachers

of the normal way of hearing. Please

learn from me because

it is hard being meet me great humans

just try greet me with fullness

of your lovely soul. When you turn

your thoughts to find reality of hearing

you will find me and your free animal

trying to hear helpful messages for you

from the animal trying to bite you. (Emerson, 2020, 16)

Emerson's poem holds no grudge, but a touch of irony, for the "great humans" she wants to teach something about her way of hearing. She writes of a non-human hearing. With Braidotti concepts, she opts out the limited human for a boundlessly autistic more-than-human. For that, is a way of liberating life from neurotypicality, or the neurotypicality that is defined as humanity.

Likewise, Ryan writes about Plants:

> Peonies are the only roses that I have growing in my garden, because I have the greatest affinity with them and, I know, I know. Germaine Greer would be all like, 'Can women please start comparing themselves to something other than roses?' and I'd be all like, 'Whatever, Germaine.' Peonies are my homegirls. I've got fluffy pink Angel Cheeks, voluminous Fairy's Petticoats, wholesome-looking Etched Salmons, electric-yellow Claire de Lunes, sumptuous Coral Charms, fuchsia-coloured First Arrivals, and wedding-gown-white Mother's Choice all moving in circles around one another, and they've gone absolutely wild. (Ryan, 2020, 11)

Ryan writes about plants as friends, her choice of cultivation based on "affinity" with her "homegirls". Ryan uses (human) categorization and naming of plants, to let the names grow out of the plants (the girls). The names become words – language as a game with itself, as a more-than-human palimpsest of human life. The language is close to the flowers. Language comes to the flowers, or from the flowers. It is a depiction of cultivation as a kind of cohabitation and communion.

Dickinson had studied botany (Martin, 2007, 6) and her poetry is filled with flower relationships:

> Before I had my eye put out,
>
> I liked as well to see
>
> As other creatures that have eyes,
>
> And know no other way.
>
> But were it told to me, to-day,
>
> That I might have the sky
>
> For mine, I tell you that my heart
>
> Would split, for size of me.
>
> The meadows mine, the mountains mine, –
>
> All forests, stintless stars,
>
> As much of noon as I could take
>
> Between my finite eyes. (2016, 16)

...

I dared not meet the daffodils,

For fear their yellow grown

Would pierce me with a fashion

So foreign to my own.

I wished the grass would hurry,

So when 'twas time to see,

He'd be too tall, the tallest one

Could stretch to look at me. (2016, 25)

For Dickinson, the encounter with daffodils is an encounter with something Other, it is terrifying. Like Ryan's love of peonies in particular, this shows that it is about a kind of personal relationship. It is an encounter full of emotion, it can never be neutral.

Dominique Forter's essayistic exofiction *Paper Home* (2021) depicts an Emily Dickinson who feels a sense of belonging above all to the more-than-human. Forter writes how Emily is a town, the churches are empty, nestled in meadow, everyone who lives there has their own words, so no one understands (2021,9). The child Emily listens to the bird and eats the same as it (a breadcrumb) (2021,13). Emily's house garden is buzzing with the hum of flowers (15), and of all the family members, the house is probably the one she likes best (23). The Dickinson written here is a person who empathizes with the non-human. Through eating, mimicking, she communicates with the bird, and the house counts as a family member.

> Now, Forter's novel cannot be read as an academic source. But I'm not interested in that. I am interested in how reading Dickinson can result in this interpretation of her life. My use of an autoethnographic method allows me to use a little "anything" for the exploration of autistic secular spirituality.
>
> It is said that it is (of course) difficult to read a poetic self as a biographical self. *Do I?* I'm not interested in doing that either. What does interest me, however, is the reader's perception of the biographical. *What does the autistic BODY do to the text, how can one think inside the autistic MIND, I get so tired of the idea that one has to be critical of the diagnosis because identity politics becomes PROBLEMATIC, I want to read to understand me.* Even though the author is now "dead," the fiction is still often read as biographical. For my inquiry, what is interesting is not what is "true," but what constitutes an interest in the biographical, and how the allegedly true exerts a force on the fictional. I therefore draw on texts about Dickinson, as well as interviews with Ryan. In order to examine the reader's response to these texts, I have used an autoethnographic method, in which my reading diary becomes part of the material under investigation.

The Spiritual

Martin describes Dickinson as "deceptively quiet [...] who wrote with fire" (vii) and "wickedly funny, fiercely loyal, and bravely original" (2007, 1). Martin refers to Dickinson's "Sister Sue" to whom she wrote letters, i.e., Susan Huntington Gilbert (2007, 15), she argues that "Susan was intricately associated with Emily Dickinson, so much so that some scholars have argued that the two women had an erotic relationship" and Dickinson responds to Susan's baby in a letter that: "there are now 'two' of her 'dear Sue'" (2007, 17).

> I read it as a lesbian aspie-love. I think of my own relationships, which are based on letter correspondence. I think of a love that is not defined by pairing, that does not follow a heterosexual matrix, but neither does it follow a homoerotic principle of jealousy.

Dickinson's schooling was shaped by religion, it was a Puritan context, but Dickinson became a kind of religious rebel over the years. She adopted or rejected aspects of religion as she saw fit, and she sought, among other things, "transcendentalism: this movement praised humanity's ability to transcend the mortal world through reflection, intuition, and openness to nature" (Martin, 2007, 32), where she found "belief in simplicity and predestination, as well as the hope for transcendent moments of grace that affirmed one's unity with a sublime God [who] supported individual rights versus the goals of society or tradition [...] the right to pursue happiness" (Martin, 2007, 27).

> Is there an autistic spirituality based on a sense of ethics and morality that is different? I think of a queer and neuroqueer relationship to the non-human. I think of Relationships. I read-read-read. An openness to nature. That's how Emerson writes. "your thoughts to find reality of hearing / you will find me and your free animal" Emerson's name is Hannah, it's like my name, Anna, with an H. I read it as a sign.

In a similar way Ryan writes about Loneliness and Community:

> Well, technically it's on my own. It never feels like it though. Everything comes alive when I'm technically by myself. (Ryan, 2020, 11)

> Millions of us are feeling the exact same way, right now, and we are united because of it. (Ryan, 2020, 65)

It is a way to understand the complex Self as many, as a multitude, a collective, and to read a community in the mere fact of feeling the same. Here the central aspect of Feeling returns. Perhaps it is not directly a question of a kind of "fusing", but it is an openness to common feeling. Ryan writes of a loneliness that is itself a community. She also writes about radical self-acceptance:

> I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. I love and accept myself exactly as I am. (Ryan, 2020, 29)

The words are repeated and repeated, as a ritual and as an incantation. In an interview, Ryan talks about how she uses the tarot. This can be interpreted as a kind of feminine (or feminist) aspect of autism – which is often characterised/mischaracterised as a young white guy with geeky interests such as computers. Ryan's autism turns to the world and to a spirituality grounded in nature. It is a Sense of the World based on a lack of boundary between the self and the surrounding nature. It is a magical thinking that is precisely based on the autistic boundlessness. Ryan's protagonist feels the world, and a certainty about his place in the world, but an uncertainty about meeting people. This insecurity she cures with words and magical thinking:

> I like the name, there's poetry to it. *Wildwood*. It quells the nerves I have about being 'too much', which are swiftly followed by the fears I have of 'not being enough', before I reassure myself with things like the names of lipsticks, *because I interpret them as signs* that I'm on the right track and that everything is going to be ok. (Ryan, 2020, 31, my italics)

> Is it just a neo-spirituality, or a neo-liberal spirituality? Is it okay to read a survival strategy as an act of resistance?

Dickinson articulates his alternative spirituality in several ways, as an overwhelming sense of the World:

> Earth would have been too much, I see,
>
> And heaven not enough for me;
>
> I should have had the joy
>
> Without the fear to justify, –
>
> The palm without the Calvary;
>
> So, Saviour, crucify. (2016, 14)

> The brain is wider than the sky,
>
> For, put them side by side,
>
> The one the other will include
>
> With ease, and you beside. (2016, 25)

> Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
>
> I keep it staying at home,
>
> With a bobolink for a chorister,
>
> And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;

I just wear my wings,

And instead of tolling the bell for church,

Our little sexton sings.

God preaches,-- a noted clergyman,--

And the sermon is never long;

So instead of getting to heaven at last,

I'm going all along! (2016, 61)

I just wear my wings. That's exactly how Ryan wears his kimono. The wings are and are not a metaphor. In *Autistic Disturbances. Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (2018), Julia Miele Rodas writes:

> Without explicitly using the term echolalia, Asperger identifies verbal repetition as characteristically autistic, noting for instance nonrational autistic responses like "Because the butterfly is snowed, snowed with snow" (2018, 41)

And:

> Despite its many problems, the extent of this disciplinary borrowing and cross-pollination ultimately contributes to a richer and more complex picture of autistic language than either arena would produce independently. *The butterfly is snowed, snowed with snow*. Part of this complex picture is that verbal repetition is well established as both a vital feature of autism speaking and a vital feature of literary and scholarly writing, worthy of repeated, even perseverative analytical attention. (2018, 42)

> It requires the repetition of *The butterfly is snowed, snowed with snow*. The wings of the butterfly. The metaphor is not a metaphor. The autistic person does not understand metaphors, so the metaphorical language through which she speaks may not be metaphors, but magical word rituals.

Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) is a lyrical essay on Dickinson's work and Howe's reading – just as my reading is not only about the text but also about the experience of reading itself, Howe's reading is about a world in which the text can exist. Howe notes that the reception, and perhaps primarily the criticism, of Dickinson has concentrated on "neurosis, repression, rejection" (Howe, 1985, xi) and her own agenda is to avoid further psychological speculation. Instead, Howe's reading focuses on how Dickinson writes out a self, in relation to the world. She perceives that "Dickinson and [Gertrude] Stein meet each other along paths of the Self that begin and end in contradiction" (1985, 11). Rodas reads Stein specifically as a poet working with an autistic poetics. Rodas also notes that autistic people are self-contradictory in that they are considered to both suffer from a lack of Self and have too much Self. I choose to interpret this - in addition to the obviously problematic medical diagnosis - as meaning that the autistic position can be read as a critique of the very idea of the Self. It is

a self position that does not relate to affirmation in a neurotypical way. Stein's and Dickinson's poetry can then be read as examples of how this contradictory self is problematised and poetically exposed. Howe writes of Dickinson's experience of the world that "Subject and object were fused at that moment, into the immediate feeling of understanding" (1985,51), which is in line with Shore's fusing. It is this extreme closeness that requires physical detachment. Howe writes: "Emily Dickinson suggests that the language of the heart has quite another grammar [...] This self-imposed exile, indoors (?), emancipated her from all representations of calculated *human* order" (1985,13, my italics). I mark "human," and how something needs to liberate Dickinson from the human. This something is or can be: the text. In prose fragment number 30, Dickinson writes:

> Did you ever read one of her Poems backward, because the plunge from the front overturned you? I sometimes (often have, many times) have – A something overtakes the Mind – (Dickinson quoted in Howe, 1985,23)

And in number 119:

> We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse– A something overtakes the mind – we do not hear it coming. (Dickinson quoted in Howe, 1985,23)

Nature, then, seems to be something that can "overtake the mind" and it is precisely a Something. The self is complex, but the world is equally complex, it is full of Something. Dickinson's poetic approach to the world, the necessary poetic work, moves between the world as physical nature and as supernatural dimension. Howe writes of a "Twofold wisdom, rational and supernatural - ceaseless mythic advance of poetic composition" (1985,61).

> When I read Howe on Dickinson, I think that the text vibrates with something dangerous. That it creates a world of literature, writing the "Lonely" Emily together with so many other bodies of text. I think of how Ralph Savarese in *See It Feelingly. Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor* (2018) reads autistic reading as a "wordy home." It is a way of finding one's alliances beyond the human, of choosing the text over the person. I wonder if this is a romanticized image. I wonder what (if anything) the danger of reading autism as magic is.

Howe suggests that "Poetry is affirmation in negation, ammunition in the yellow eye of a gun that an allegorical pilgrim will shoot straight into the quiet of Night's frame" (1985,138). And my experience of the dangerous seems confirmed. The autistic position implies a risk-taking, precisely because it does not care for an affirmative security. It is what also opens up to a way of thinking that does not require a world ordered according to norms. The magical (supernatural) thinking can be the result of simultaneously a necessity – the normative *does not work*, is *incomprehensible* - and a possibility - *it does not have to be this way, it can be this way and this way and in a hundred magical ways.*

Conclusions

Stenning (2020) and Botha (2021) show how autistic people have been denied the characteristics of what it is to be *fully human*, including empathy, morality, and a sense of self. Stenning further investigates how autistic life writing often circle around a narrative where autistic people are related to, or relate themselves to, animals, plants, and nature, rather than

other human beings. Stenning points to the risk of seeing autistic persons as closer to nature (Stenning, 2020). In this article, I have suggested a different response to the idea of autistics being tuned in with the more-than-human rather than the human. Using Braidotti's argument that "because my gender, historically speaking, *never quite made it into full humanity*, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted" (Braidotti, 2006, 130, my italics), I suggest that the autistic orientation towards the more-than-human could be read as an act of resistance, as well as a different way of performing empathy. I thereby mean that there is a relevant overlap of neurodivergent and ecohumanist, posthumanist, ecocritical and new materialist strategies for understanding the world and arguing for this understanding. Since the understanding of empathy is partly emotional, and always subjective, I have used an autoetnographic method to investigate my reading of a number of autistic writers' work. I hereby suggest that text as such, is also a possible way of expressing nature as well as empathy, and the relation between those. The autoetnographic borders on the poetic and the political. It also puts my position, as a writer, reader, experiencer, and researcher in the middle of the argument.

I am autistic. I read as an autistic reader. I *fuse* with the text (Shore 2003), just like the text *fuse* with nature. This is not a neutral reading, but an engaged and emotional.

> My friend writes to me: Found the word "Rupture". I misread it: "Rapture". I'm thinking rA/Upture. The rapture that requires a rupture to occur. The rupture that develops into a rapture. The autistic rupture that opens up the world to *please please*
>
> Please be with me great free animals. I want to be
>
> with you great being of light. Please see me great
>
> nobody nobody nobody hell animals trying to go
>
> to helpful keepers of the knowledge try to go
>
> to the place in the mud that is where I try to live
>
> in peace great mud of this great kissing loving
>
> earth lovely messy yucky in mud on my face if
>
> kissing mother loving me is the great animal
>
> that is named Hannah. (Emerson, 2020, 18)

I have written about my reading of Dickinson, Emerson, and Ryan. I have read to understand myself. I have taken notes:

> HOW TO UNDERSTAND AUTISTIC PASSION, WHAT PATTERNS DO YOU HAVE TO PUT THE AUTISTIC WOMAN IN, TO MAKE HER UNDERSTANDABLE.

To read autistic people (women), as closer to nature is of course problematic. To read as less human is to do violence. But I want instead to make a reading that actively rejects a normative humanity. Which hears other things. I've been reading as if these texts (rather than their authors), move like me. I want to be critical, but above all I want to read autism through a poetic filter, where "poetry is affirmation in negation," where the impossibility of being fully

human represents the possibility, the opening. I have tried to read an autistic passion. An autistic worldly spiritualism. Comprehension comes when I read and recognize. It is an exclusive comprehension. One that can and risks being fetishized, but I'm willing to take the risk. It's okay if I'm not human, because my allies are more like cats and trees.

I have read the autistic way of understanding and approaching the world as an ecocritical, posthumanist, magical approach. The intersection of neurodiversity and ecocriticism requires further exploration. I want to point out here the emancipatory aspects of a rejection of the fully, neurotypical, human. Just like Tokarczuk's Duszejko bases her ethics on a spark, that passes the Moon, and "gains something as intangible as the soul" (Tokarczuk, 2019, 219), Dickinson, Ryan and Emerson form their sense of alliance with the world through a non-human spirituality. This spirituality is (unconsciously) informed by aspects of ecosophy, such as the collapse of the individual into the universal, where self-love is linked to a wider notion of love for the world, and where the ethical or political is never possible to separate from the subjective. Loe points to the haptic aspects of rhetoricity as a means to understand how rhetoric can be used as a tool for resistance against anthropomorphism as well as oppression of neurodivergent subjects (Loe, 2017, 42). I have used my own reading, my reading-writing, my communication with books through neurodivergent reading practices, to formulate a sense of empathy with the world (as well as the word).

I read neurodivergence as a protest. That might be problematic; there is a thin line between *refusing* and *not being able to*. I suggest a collapse of this line. I suggest reading *not being able to* as a *refusal* – perhaps the most definite kind. A poetic refusal, a spiritual refusal, an affirmative refusal. I have written this text through an autoethnographic method, putting myself into the analysis of the texts, letting my reading be a practice of care and empathy, where the political and ethical is close to the heart and the core of the (my) being. I end with a sense of being more me than before, and at the same time, having fused totally with the text and the nature-animal-moons within the text. To care is to risk an I that was never obvious to the autistic subject. To risk is to speak-write in a language with an agency of its own, a poetic agency. To be a poet is to be, to be, to be.

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