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<https://thepolyphony.org/2023/03/31/poetry-and-stimming/>

GROWLERS

go reg

go rose

go george

go solo

reel wool

slog logs

o go slow

G.O.s resell sewers

ogres woo lesser eggs

we gorge orwells greggs rolls

we grow lego owls

we go see geese

we glow logos

we see errors

we go worse

we row

we lose

we swell

so well well rollers

we were loose

we were losers

we were gel

we grew egos

we were gross

so go slow

go slower

we grow

so slow

I dedicate the lipogramatic poem above to World Autism Acceptance Week this year. Originally, I intended to write a poem as a way to thank the staff and the audience at Growlers, a bar in Leeds where I was invited to give a poetry reading not long ago. In this poem, I use only the eight letters in the word “Growlers”. The poem turned into a celebration of something that has always characterised my life: graduality. My childhood was marked by, to use a medical term, developmental delay. That *slowness* continues into my adulthood, even if the milestones (or millstones) are more social than psychological. However, taking a more poetic reading of the term “developmental delay”, I find that it seems to convey hope now.

Writing poems in constrained alphabets, I immerse myself in “language slowed down”. The seeing, the selection and the sequencing of words (and of words within words) create a sensory experience that helps me to communicate my thoughts. In this article, I reflect on the value of “stimming”, a central feature of autistic daily life. Exploring its relation to poetry, I celebrate slowness as something of neurological and social importance to autistic people.

Stimming

For many autistic people, “stimming” is part of their daily life. Short for “self-stimulation”, stimming might include bouncing a knee, tapping one’s fingers, or clenching and relaxing a muscle. Stimming happens as both a passive and active experience. Sometimes it is done unconsciously, but often it is not. The defining feature of stimming is repetition, and it has distinct sensory effects. But where there is repetition, there is also variation. One of my favourite repeated activities is listening to Brian Eno and John Cale’s song “Spinning Away” while watching drone footage online of Croxden Abbey in Staffordshire. Yet every time I do this – something I look forward to every Friday – it feels unique in each afternoon.

Conscious stimming, where the mind and body specifically focus on a repetitive movement, can often be pleasurable. However, stimming can take more complex forms (National Autistic Society 2020). Sometimes, I repeatedly tense my muscles to the extent that it creates discomfort for me, but that is in a way the point. If I am tensing a muscle till it hurts, it helps me to physically “conduct” my sensory consciousness away from stimulations that *can’t* be controlled. Such stimulations could be penetrating noises, or dazzling lights, although these might easily go unnoticed by non-neurodivergent people. It’s important, then, for others to be aware that stimming is an autistic coping strategy (McGrath 2017: 17, 78, 159, 167-8).

Stimming also happens unconsciously to autistic individuals. It can come as a surprise when the surrounding people point it out. But to ask an autistic person to stop stimming when it is not causing any danger or harm has always seemed to me unrealistic and frequently unreasonable. At school, I was often told off for unconsciously bouncing my knee. I would make an effort to stop, but that took

up all my concentration, leaving me unable to listen or learn. When stimulating involves the senses, the effects can be both pleasurable and creative. This brings me to a topic, or indeed a realm, with which autism has only recently come to be associated: poetry.

Autism and Poetry

In one important sense, creative writings by autistic authors collectively form a protest against dominant cultural – and medical – notions of what it means to be autistic. For the past four decades, society has tended to associate the abilities of autistic people quite narrowly with systemising and pattern finding (Baron-Cohen 2012: 152-3). Therefore, scientific narratives have insisted that autistic individuals tend to disproportionately gravitate towards STEM subjects, that is, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Baron-Cohen 2012: 137-40). This is because autistics are believed to be “systemisers” rather than “empathisers” (ibid.). [1] I have written [elsewhere](#) on how, as well as misrepresenting the autistic population, this somewhat dehumanising medical equation neglects and even discourages the possibility that many autistic people are highly creative (McGrath 2019). [2]

Writing and reading poetry for me are not *mere* forms of stimulating. Both are central to my actual work as a writer and lecturer. Yet poetry appeals to my autistic senses in ways that prose and conversation tend not to do. In the book *May Tomorrow Be Awake* (2022), neurodivergent poet and teacher Chris Martin quotes one of his young autistic student poets as likening typed communication to dance (Martin 2022: 1). Indeed, to read and to write poetry are themselves forms of dance, creating rhythms across the mind, as well as within the movements of the vocal chords, tongue and lips.

My recent poems are mainly lipograms. That is to say, I use a fixed set of letters in poetry composition. Poems “in constraints” of this kind are most extensively associated with the *Oulipo* movement, which took off in the 1960s (Terry 2020). The most famous example of this is George Perec’s novel *A Void* (1969), which never uses the letter “e”. My own arrival at similar techniques, though, was more personal. My Grandad, a mechanic who left school aged 14, loved crosswords and other word games. When he was looking after me and wanted a bit of peace, he would write out a single word on the back of an old birthday

card, and ask me to see how many other words I could make with those letters. It instilled in me a love of language as a kind of musical (as well as visual) instrument.

Writing in constraints, two things happen. First, limiting language itself to a small set of letters creates much closer patterns of sound. Second, I find myself using words – and saying things – that might not otherwise have been made possible.

“Language slowed down” has both a neurological and social importance to me as an autistic adult. I also feel that there’s something bigger to the whole process – especially during a time where we are so surrounded by information and misinformation. In the poem “Growlers”, I want to celebrate language itself as a sensory experience through both the visual and the voiced.

Endnotes

[1] For the most extensive coverage of this theory, see Baron-Cohen’s *The Essential Difference* (2012).

[2] Importantly, there are now various autistic authors whose creative work celebrates (as well as critiquing) what it means to be autistic. L. W. Bonneville’s autobiographical novel *Ta-Ra Alice: Odyssey on a Shrinking Raft* (2017) is a most incisive narrative of autism and gender. I heartily recommend Joanne Limburg’s book of poems *The Autistic Alice* (2017), and also Kate Fox’s collection *Oscillations* (2021).

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About the author

Dr James McGrath is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Leeds Beckett University. His first book, *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* is available from Rowman & Littlefield International. He is currently completing a collection of poems titled *autistic figurations*. He can be found on Twitter at @DrJamesMcGrath

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