

Donna Williams' Autisms.

Part One: Psychoeducation As Enslavement To 'Autism' As A Master Signifier ¹

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Donna Williams

Donna Williams, an Australian born in 1963, is mainly known for her moving autobiographical accounts of her autism. Between 1992 and 2004 she wrote four books, allowing us to follow the different stages of her autism and the different stages of her treatment of her own autism. In fact you can purchase these books on her website, that is very informative and she keeps a very active blog.

With a typical delay of more than 10 years, Lacanian psychoanalysis has come to take Donna Williams' accounts of her autism and of her treatments of her autism seriously – indeed, we have only become interested in Donna Williams since 2010, which is to the credit of Eric Laurent and Jean-Claude Maleval.

But Donna Williams is also an inspired therapist who invented and implemented some new therapeutic techniques for autism. The interesting thing about these techniques is that they are, to a large extent, based on the way her father treated her as a child. I will not go so far as to claim that our Lacanian ways of treating autism today are

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directly attributable to Donna Williams – but we do have to admit that our growing experience with and conceptualisation of autism make us take account of some of her startling techniques.

And last but not least, Donna Williams also made quite a reasonable attempt to formulate a kind of theory of autism. A theory that runs counter to any idea of a typical “wiring” of the brain in autism and even concludes that autism as such does not exist – or in any case one can never put one’s finger on the autism itself. For Donna Williams each autist is a kind of “inconceivably private fruit salad”,² a complex blend of a variety of *co-occurring conditions* or co-morbidities. For instance, Donna claims for herself more than half a dozen DSM-disorders – that all together function as a kind of “solution” to her autism, a **synthomatic** solution, we could say – which means that in her theory also, Donna Williams ends up rather Lacanian.

I will not go into her therapeutic techniques for autism and her theory of autism but will limit the focus to Donna Williams’ autobiographical accounts of her autism. I have indeed struggled through her accounts and I have tried to produce some order and structure out of this material. I have done so inspired by some casual remarks Eric Laurent and Jean-Claude Maleval made on her “case” (ref. bibliography) and this has resulted in the identification of a number of leading themes. Some of these themes may come across as rather provocative to our psychoanalytic theory of autism as a form of psychosis. I will not go into that, instead I have singled out the theme of *autisme à deux*. What then is the importance, but also the impasse, of a particular period of *autisme à deux* in the case of Donna Williams? And what can we learn from it regarding the assessment of the end of psychoanalysis?

Donna Williams’ Four Treatments of her Autism

In the case of Donna Williams [Donna] the episode of *autisme à deux*

² All direct quotations extracted from Williams’ book, blog and website as detailed in bibliography.

fits into a series of treatments of her autism. Four stages in Donna's treatment of her autism – based on four different conceptions of autism can be distinguished:

First, autism is supposed to be the consequence of a childhood-trauma (in relation to the mother). This, of course, calls for a kind of Freudian analysis, applied, in her case, by some classical psychiatrist who questions the family relations and the oedipal history.

Second, autism is presented as a handicap, a disability located in the brain, which leads to a downright psycho-educational approach by a well known psychologist who informs the afflicted about the nature of their handicap and instructs them how to cope with it.

Third, autism is defined as social and communication problem. This allows for "autism" to function as a master signifier that herds together all autists with the same social and communication problem. This formulation consequently leads to a kind of social treatment of her autism by Donna by means of a relation with an equally autistic partner. This is what I call *autisme à deux*.

Fourth, autism is, as it were, dissolved into a *fruit salad* of all kinds of DSM-disorders. This compels Donna to take the helm herself in a never ending attempt to knot together four different self-made statuses. Four different self-made statuses, as being "the first autist ever who ...":

- the first autist ever to have written about her own autism
- the first autistic inventor ever of therapeutic techniques for the treatment of autism
- the first autistic theoretician of autism
- and last but not least, the first autistic musician, painter and sculptor ever to have achieved this or that in the art scene.

Donna's attempt to knot together these four forms of "being the first autist ever who ..." could be called a *sinthomatic* treatment of her autism.

In this paper I will not go into this last *sinthomatic* solution; this will be the subject of a later paper. Here I will sketch the first and

the second stage in Donna's treatment of her autism insofar as this is a prerequisite for fully appreciating the therapeutic value, and the impasse, of the *autisme à deux*, as the third stage of Donna's treatment of her autism – which is the main focus of this paper.³

Donna Williams' First Treatment of her Autism: An Attempt at a Freudian Analysis of the Oedipal History & the Promotion of Identifications

Trigger

Let's begin with the first, vaguely "Freudian" attempt at treatment of her autism. What was the trigger for seeking help at that moment? At 16 Donna ran away from home, fleeing all kinds of sexual and aggressive abuse by her mother. Home was hell for Donna. Unfortunately running away from home simply meant that she jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. She became what she calls a "domestic prostitute", being exploited financially and sexually, in shadowy relations with all kinds of scum. And professionally it was "a dozen trades, thirteen miseries". Finally life became such a muddle that Donna got depressed and anxious. This is relevant to note, as at that time, the idea that this had something to do with autism, had not come up yet.

In this sorry plight Donna was referred to a psychiatrist, a female psychiatrist – who Donna would always address, in a surprisingly intimate way, as "Mary".

Turning Point

Mary treated Donna in a way Donna herself qualifies as "Freud-

³ The expression *autisme à deux* was coined by Lacan, in 1975, in his Seminar XXIV to account for an ethical problem at the end of a psychoanalysis. I will not go into that ethical problem here but instead move immediately to the clinical form of *autisme à deux* in the case of Donna Williams. This may cast some light on the ethical problem of *autisme à deux* at the end of a psychoanalysis.

ian", but at the occasion of a particular incident this vaguely Freudian approach brutally meets its end. What is this incident? Donna is working in a small shop, a kind of newspaper-shop, and there she becomes "attached" to a customer, an old man. One day this old man addresses her in a friendly manner but Donna is completely taken aback: she reacts "autistically", staring at him "as if she were a *ghost* ...". The next time the old man enters it is tit for tat: now he ignores Donna completely and this makes Donna flee in panic to Mary. At first Mary responds in a very Freudian manner to Donna's panic. She does so, because she "knows" indeed; Mary thinks she knows the oedipal background to this shop-scene. She knows that as a child, at the age of 6, Donna had already displayed the same "autistic" reaction at the deathbed of her paternal grandfather – there Donna also had stood "as if she were a ghost". So Mary tries to make Donna see that the shop-scene is but a simple repetition of the oedipal scene at the deathbed of this grandfather: "the old man ignoring you is your dead grandfather". At that moment, Mary is "getting too close". Donna feels pushed by Mary, pushed to betray something – something that Donna calls a *personal significance*.

Donna in fact does hide a *personal significance* but this is not what Mary thinks, from her Freudian point of view. Donna does not hide some "incestuous love" for her grandfather – which indeed would be a perfect Freudian explanation for Donna's autistic reaction at his deathbed, at the age of 6. The *personal significance* – which Donna on no account wants to betray to Mary is the fact that – for Donna, at that time, at the age of 6 – her grandfather already had stopped existing for several years. Indeed, at the age of 3, Donna had lived a kind of elementary experience, in relation not to her grandfather but, to her father: "at the age of 3 my father simply stopped existing, he deserted me".

In the wake of that event, if I may say so, at that moment the grandfather also had stopped existing. Consequently, for Donna, the shop-scene with the old man does not constitute the repetition of the second death of the grandfather, his "real death", at the age of 6

but the emergence in the real of the grandfather from before his first, symbolic death, at the age of 3: “my grandfather was back, I was 3 years old, and he hadn’t yet lost me”.

When Mary sees that her interpretation, of the oedipal repetition, is counterproductive, she starts to panic in turn and radically changes tactics, strategies and politics. She no longer coldly analyses Donna’s history and family stories but starts empathising with Donna and focusing on her future.

As a result of this sudden reorientation of the treatment, Donna develops a rather constructive double identification with Mary. On the one hand Donna identifies with Mary in the symbolic dimension, with a symbolic trait of Mary’s, she identifies with Mary’s knowledge. Donna, without any notable preparatory schooling, embarks on studies in psychology and languages, “both occupy themselves with systems (mind and language), that one endlessly can deconstruct and reconstruct”, as she says and she becomes a “psych” – just like Mary. On the other hand Donna also identifies with Mary in the Imaginary dimension, with the image of Mary as a woman. She identifies with Mary’s womanliness and becomes a “Lady” – just like Mary.

Limit of the Identifications

Soon after the end of the therapy with Mary these identifications – therapeutic as they may be – show their limits. The point is that these identifications only took place at the level of Donna’s so-called “characters”. A few words about Donna’s characters because these characters are crucial in her autism.

They are comparable to imaginary friends – who, in specific circumstances, pop up as a kind of a stand-in, delivering “stored speech” and going through the motions of “stored actions”. Donna developed her first characters at the age of 3 – at the moment, it should be recalled, when her father, and grandfather, stopped existing. Since that time Donna had developed a series of characters, in her blog I

identified no less than 16 of them! Aside, and just to be perfectly clear, for Donna these characters do not correspond to a basic expression of her autism. She claims a completely different diagnosis for them.

Some years ago, at the age of 46, Donna had arranged for her characters to be diagnosed as Dissociative Identity Disorder, a disorder she gladly added to the ever increasing number of disorders that, as part of her *sinthomatic* solution, allow her to dissolve her autism. But for the moment we are only interested in those characters insofar as they determine the therapeutic limit of Donna's first therapy, the limit of Mary's promotion of a double form of identification with her. In that series of *characters* two of them stand out. First in line is Willie – Willie the tough guy, the strapper, the husky and then we have Carol – Carol the foolish chick, the wench.

Both have their own genesis in Donna's life history but the point is that, in her therapy with Mary, Donna never ever hinted at the existence of these two characters because, as she confesses, this would only have corroborated Mary in her psychoanalytic prejudice that she, Donna, was schizophrenic. But yet it's these two characters that are the carriers, if I may say so, of Mary's therapeutic effect.

If Donna studies and becomes a "psych" who "explains, analyses and impresses" – just like Mary – this is only because the character Willie has put in a great effort to civilise himself. And if Donna becomes a "lady" who "charms and chats" – just like Mary – this is only because Willie, after having become a "psych", has patiently re-educated his co-character Carol.

Now what is the impact of the education of these two characters, in the identification with Mary? The impact is two-sided. On the one hand this seems to have an ambiguous impact on Donna's autistic enjoyment. It's not easy to determine the nature of enjoyment, of autistic enjoyment in Donna's case. My idea is that it has to do with the gaze, with the gaze that has not been "extracted" as an object, a gaze by which Donna is consequently hypnotised. This comes to light, I think, in the particular phenomenon Donna calls "sensing" – which means that Donna regularly loses herself completely, wallowing in

an internal universe dominated by a freaky play of lights and colours. Thanks to the identifications with Mary, and their educative effects on the characters Willie and Carol, Donna becomes more able to hide this sensing, to hide her autistic enjoyment of the gaze and to enjoy this enjoyment far more and better than before. But on the other hand it appears that, as a consequence of this better functioning of her characters, Donna, for some reason, is also more at risk of a sudden traversing of her mirror image – which is an extremely frightening experience. For instance, one day, shortly after the end of the treatment with Mary, Donna goes outdoors and enters a world where everything has become the mirror image of the world she had left behind her before entering the building and as a consequence she takes the wrong direction and for two days drifts around.

We will come back to Donna's relation with her mirror image

Donna Williams' Second Treatment of her Autism: Psycho-Education by an Anti-expert of the Autist as a Handicapped Person

Trigger

This time the trigger is the fiasco of her first love crush at age 25.

During a trip to Wales Donna immediately feels a direct rapport with a man called Shaun, a rapport on two levels. Firstly they speak the same language, the same "poetry like speech", both mumble to themselves, without trying to produce a clear cut meaning for the other.

As an effect of this kind of "communication", Donna, for the first time gets a feeling of being – that she calls "simply being", and which is a kind of "being on a parallel with the other". Secondly, she has this feeling that, on the cliffs of Wales, "Shaun's body blows through my own body", and as a result Donna, for the first time, gets the feeling of having a body. I will come back to this shared language and this shared body, when going into the *autisme à deux* of Donna with her

next lover, but first we have to deal with Donna's reaction to the fiasco of her first love.

Very soon the man with whom Donna has this instant spiritual and bodily rapport, reveals himself to be an alcoholic who is severely socially handicapped and whom his parents call "schizophrenic" and here their burgeoning relationship is brutally nipped in the bud.

In response to this rupture Donna writes her first book, *Nobody Nowhere* in an attempt to understand why she was the way she was and as a farewell letter.

But in the meantime, before committing suicide, Donna also inquires into what she immediately had felt she had in common with this so-called schizophrenic man.

And so it came to pass that she suddenly stumbled upon the signifier "autism" – or rather, the signifier "autism" jumped out at her from the pages of a psychology textbook: "autism, not to be confused with schizophrenia", it read!

This is what rescues her – as a master signifier the word autism gives her the kiss of life, it helps her, as she says, "... to understand myself and my world" and "... to forgive myself and my family for being the way I was".

The Expert Other

Back home in Australia, without a moment's thought Donna addresses, with this master signifier, the most notorious Australian expert in the field of autism, a man called Lawrence Bartak (whom Donna, in her second book, calls Marek). Unlike Mary, this Bartak is not a psychiatrist but an educational psychologist. Although Bartak is not a doctor, Donna will always address him as "Doctor".

This is in marked contrast with the intimate way she had addressed her psychiatrist during her first treatment as Mary, only to experience that Mary finally was getting too close. Now Donna immediately introduces a distance.

Psycho-Education in the Registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real

Bartak's first act is the reinforcement of Donna's lifesaving auto-diagnosis of autism. He really copper fastens her autism as a master signifier by making her take an intelligence test and telling her that her results are "typical for autism" (high score on some subtests and a low one on other subtests).

And this sets the scene for putting in a calculated series, four interventions in direct response to four problems of Donna. Interventions which are psycho-educational – which means that Bartak dispenses information about autism as a brain-based handicap and instructions on how to cope with it and that he does so in a most categorical matter-of-fact way without thinking, based on a what seems to be a "simple unquestionable knowledge". He's not some *subject supposed to know* – he simply knows! Oddly enough this psycho-education has some rather drastic effects on Donna.

The first psycho-educational intervention by Bartak addresses Donna's first problem, for which there are two formulations. The first formulation is articulated as, "I am always being bullied and laughed at [...] because I do not know the rules for being myself and joining in with other people at the same time".

While the second formulation is articulated as, "what do I have to accept as invariable in myself? And "where can I change?". This is a problem which Donna ultimately translates in the diplomatic request to Bartak for – "rules without exceptions ... if you know". Bartak's solution, Bartak's bland answer is, "Things need a nervous system in order to think or feel".

This answer instantly has a dramatic effect on Donna. On the one hand her characters start to crumble. The characters, who, thanks to Mary's therapy, had learned how to manage Donna's worldly affairs – each in their own way, from their own thoughts and feelings. Now, having no brains, Willie and Carol cannot have thoughts or feelings of their own any longer – and as a consequence they crumble.

But in Donna's world something else starts to crumble too. At first sight there is not much left in her world to crumble. After the desertion of her father, at the age of 3, people had stopped existing for her.

But on the other hand, it should be pointed out that, ever since that time, as a kind of imaginary compensation, it seems, some objects had become "animated" for Donna. She had "befriended" some objects to which she attributed a basic form of thought and feeling. Now, with Bartak's "Things need a nervous system in order to think or feel", these animated objects, having no brains, cannot any longer have thoughts or feelings either – and as a consequence they also start to lose their imaginary consistency.

But to tell the truth, this crumbling of her educated characters and her animated objects is only Donna's direct experience. It soon appears that the effect of Bartak's "information" is not that dramatic – and even that in the end the effect is just the opposite. We will see that the characters Willie and Carol do very well without brains – and even manage to do better. And as regards the objects, we will see that their "animism" has withdrawn itself in one single privileged object – where it proves to be unassailable: I mean Donna's mirror image. Indeed, after Bartak's verdict, her mirror image proves to be more animated than ever, it is more than ever gifted with thoughts and feelings of its own and so the third stage of Donna's treatment of her autism, with the *autisme à deux* will first operate a kind of displacement of the mirror image and then will degenerate into an obsessional fight against the massive return of the characters.

But first let us complete the impressive series of Bartak's psycho-educational interventions. Donna's second problem is articulated as, "I have 'social and communication problems' and as consequence I do not understand what the Other says, I have difficulty extracting meaning from what the Other says".

Bartak's solution in response to this problem with the meaning of language, is first to repeat his "rule with no exceptions", making it as it were "operational" for the case of autism. He tells Donna that "thinking and feeling are a matter of brains and in these brains everything is

a matter of information: information processing and information integration, getting all the bits of information working at once and that is precisely where you, as an autistic, are handicapped: you do not succeed in processing the information and you do not succeed in integrating all that information”.

Having made this point, this quilting point, Bartak then proposes that Donna radically changes her subjective position. When communicating with the Other, the autistic has to put himself in the meta-position of the Other of the Other.

These are his instructions to Donna: “first tell others that you’re an autistic which means that you have to tell them that you are *meaning deaf* so make clear to them at which moment you drop out, at which moment you cannot any longer follow the meaning of what they’re saying” “and then you have to instruct them how they should speak to you in order for you to be able to extract meaning from their words which means that you should try to format the speech of others on three fronts”:

- **the signifiers of the Other**

“Speak to me through my words! Speak my language!”

“State the facts! Leave out the garble, leave out that emo-crap!”

- **the voice of the Other**

“Take the dancing out of your voice! Speak evenly!”

“Speak to me, one person at a time!”

- **the gaze of the Other**

“Speak to me in my own familiar surroundings!”

“And don’t pull faces when you talk to me!”

From that moment on Bartak’s treatment consists of a rigorous training in the field of how to take and how to keep this meta-position of the Other of the Other. To that end Donna is even allowed in the Bartak household – where she is encouraged to format the way Bartak and

his wife talk to her. But she is also in luck in that her landlord and his wife are into that kind of training and they too encourage Donna to format their way of talking to her.

Donna's reaction to all that formatting of the speech of the Other is a measurable increase in *meaning*. Before Donna only understood 10% of what the Other was saying. Now, under ideal circumstances, when she can completely format the speech of the Other, she understands up to 70%.

Nevertheless, some serious problems remain with meaning obtained in this way: the meaning is rigidly fixed; you could say that metonymy and metaphor do not operate. When something Donna had understood in one specific context suddenly pops up in another context, Donna does not understand any longer. For instance, a cow becoming part of a herd has no longer meaning to her and when a cow is transformed into its hide, when a cow has become leather, Donna cannot link that to the cow either. Extracting *meaning* in this way also remains an exhausting activity – exhausting because it is devoid of any form of enjoyment: it is “meaning without inner experience”, there is “no enjoyment of conversation for company's sake”, and last but not least, aggression crops up when the Other resists this formatting, when the Other does not allow Donna to fixate the meaning of his speech, to function as this Other. Then Donna simply walks away, saying “your words, I have no use for them, they're just words”.

Of course, the dimension and the position of this problem radically change when the psycho-educated autist achieves a position of power – which, in our contemporary management and ICT-ridden society, more and more becomes the rule, the standard. Autists no longer simply walk away, being in the position to simply compel others to comply to the formats of communication they identify with but that's another, ideological discussion ...

Donna has problems with emotions, the only emotion she knows is anger and of that anger she only knows its caricatured expression: raising one's voice. So Donna asks Bartak, “How do others learn to feel and to express emotions?”

Once again Bartak is not at a loss for an answer: “others learn that ‘naturally’, without conscious analysis”, implying of course that autists like Donna, being handicapped in this respect, should learn to feel and express emotions factitiously, on the basis of a conscious analysis. Donna’s reaction?

Donna has understood and immediately sets to work with the kind cooperation of her landlord and his wife, once again. She makes up mathematical “scales & diagrams and models” of different emotions and then trains these emotions by making her landlord and his wife *act out* these emotions and then imitating these faked emotions.

Finally Donna has problems with *social touch*, with bodily contact in a social context (later on we will come back to the problem of sexually tinged bodily contact): she will never ever touch someone else’s hand. Once again Bartak’s answer is not long in coming: “touch my hand!” he orders Donna.

In response to that unexpected instruction, Donna at top speed goes through a whole imaginary process – at the end of which she will be able to touch Bartak’s hand. She starts off by experimenting frantically with her mirror image but also with the relation of her own mirror image to the mirror image of a girlfriend. Donna sets up a whole scenario of touching and looking and discussing in front of the mirror with that girlfriend. The key moment of these mirror games occur when, at a given moment Donna notices that her friend looks away from her own mirror image and she bursts out laughing, turning to the girlfriend and saying: “yourself in there is not the same as myself in there”. So Donna has noticed that they do not have the same relationship with their mirror images.

“[W]hen you look away, I can see that your mirror image also looks away” “but I never saw my own mirror image look away when I looked away – when I looked back ‘she’ had been staring at me as always”. At this moment it appears that, as already mentioned, Donna believes that her mirror image is animated, oddly enough, after a meaty discussion with the girlfriend, Donna now for the first time “takes it on faith” that in her case too her mirror image must look away when

she looks away.

However, I can already give away that this does not yet mean a real acceptance of her mirror image as being but an image. We will see that her mirror image stubbornly continues to retain a life of its own. Anyway, after these mirror games, after this first “symbolic” acceptance of her mirror image as such, Donna is ready to experiment with touch in reality. Successively she furtively touches the women at her disposal: her girlfriend, an aunt – and finally also Bartak’s wife.

It’s only after this female roundabout that Donna will be able to touch of her own accord, the hand of a man, the hand of Bartak – to touch his hand and to leave him.

Limits of the Psycho-education

Now what is the problem with this psycho-educational approach?

To me, at least in this case, the problem seems to be that its final effect is exactly the opposite of the instantaneous effect of Bartak’s first intervention. As already mentioned, the initial information, “Things need a nervous system in order to think or feel” instantly had this dramatic effect of crumbling everything brainless: the characters Willy and Carol that made up Donna’s Self, the “animated” objects that made up her world. But in the end it will appear that the series of Bartak’s interventions has reinforced the characters and concentrated all of the animism or “life” of her objects in her mirror image, as we will now be able to verify in the third stage of Donna’s treatment of her autism – the stage I call *autisme à deux*.

As a matter of fact we will see how this *autisme à deux* first allows Donna to operate a massive displacement of her mirror image and then how this *autisme à deux* degenerates into an obsessional fight against the massive return of the characters, Willie and Donna in the first place.

Donna Williams' Third Treatment of her Autism: Love as *Autisme À Deux* With Equally Autistic People

Trigger

The trigger for this *autisme à deux* is Donna's chance meeting with Ian a salesman in a music-shop. Donna immediately feels that it clicks with Ian. She immediately has this double-edged feeling of sameness and rapport with him. I distinguish between both dimensions: the feeling of "sameness" (her term) is based on their shared "autism", as a master signifier, and the feeling of "rapport" (my term) is based on their shared "asexuality", as a name for their enjoyment.

In no time, complications with both feelings will arise. Firstly it manifests via the feeling of "autistic sameness" – and its complications in the little everyday things of their life together. And then emerges through the feeling of an "asexual rapport" – and its complications in their burgeoning sexual attraction.

Autistic Sameness

Donna instantly has this feeling of "sameness" with Ian: "we were like single bodied clones". This feeling of sameness is based on their being equally autistic – we could say that it is based on autism as a master signifier. Donna checks the master signifier of autism on the side of Ian as a kind of preliminary to any possible relationship. Donna first of all checks the presence of her own autism on Ian's side: "what do you know about autism?" she asks him straightaway.

And then she makes him go through a real checklist, checking all the registers of her own autism in his case.

The symbolic: due to "social and communication problems" both have the same problem with meaning, both only understand 10% of what the Other says.

The imaginary: in order to act normally both have to fall back on 'characters', with their "stored speech and actions" and Ian has a very peculiar relationship with the mirror too or rather he constructed his own alternative for a mirror image of himself.

You could say that he projects his mirror image in the outside world, by trying to establish symmetry everywhere. In just a moment we will see how Donna is able to distance herself from her own animated mirror image, by adopting Ian's symmetry obsession, albeit in her own way.

And last but not least, when it comes to the real: both experience the same problem with their body, neither of them likes to touch or to be touched neither of them capture signals of bodily needs like hunger, pain, cold, tiredness, or the need to go to the toilet but most important of all – and this is a completely new trait of autism – both suffer to the same extent of recurrent episodes of "Big Black Nothingness".

What is this Big Black Nothingness?

Donna presents this Big Black Nothingness as an elementary experience.

At the age of 4 she suddenly had this experience of the room around her coming alive as a pumping "shell of living flesh". An extremely frightening experience, in which, the object of the gaze disappears and the object of the voice comes to the fore.

First of all an inner voice calling out repeatedly "don't wanna die!" trails off in a kind of echo, in an outside voice whispering "die!"

Meanwhile Donna dashes in all directions, looking for the mirror, in particular looking for the eyes in her mirror image – but not finding them (which means that, at least at that moment, her mirror image is not any longer animated ...). Finally a voice is heard, calling "stop it!" and "everything stops dead in a state of suspended animation". After that initial experience this Big Black Nothingness kept coming back, even several times a day in this final version.

The shell of living flesh has swollen into 'a wall of water, a wall of tidal waves' and the voice has risen to 'a roaring sound'

How do we have to understand this Big Black Nothingness? According to Donna, at the time of her relationship with Ian this Big Black Nothingness is, the sign of an "emotional overload", "just like a computer that is working at full capacity suddenly can shut down". If we may translate "emotional overload" as "enjoyment", then we can understand this Big Black Nothingness as "the return of *jouissance* on the border" – *retour de la jouissance sur le bord*, which is Eric Laurent's basic intuition concerning autism.

In Donna's case this border is constituted by the room, the room that transforms itself into a shell of palpitating flesh, corresponds to the return of *jouissance*. The return of *jouissance* implies the appearance of the voice as an object, the appearance of the voice goes hand in hand with the loss of the gaze, with the brutal emptying of the sensing, of the autistic *jouissance* of the gaze, of the wallowing in an internal universe dominated by a freaky play of lights and colours.

Something Like the Mirror Stage, at Last!

Donna having checked that she and Ian are equally autistic, in the 3 registers of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, Ian can provide her with a substitute for her mirror image. Indeed, Donna still has trouble with her mirror image, shortly after the start of her relation with Ian it is revealed that she still believes her mirror image to be animated, it still has a hidden life of its own. Secretly, Donna still believes that she's looked at from the space behind the mirror.

Here a brief outline of Donna's relationship with her mirror image is called for.

From the beginning her mirror image had a life of its own, for instance the character Carol did originate in a girl Donna had lost sight of in reality and who returned to her through her own mirror image.

As we have seen, this animism of her mirror image has only been enhanced by Bartak's psycho-educational information that thoughts and feelings are brain-based. As a consequence of this information all animism of her objects had retreated into her mirror image. We also saw how a complex mirror game with a girlfriend, and the ensuing discussion, brought Donna to the intellectual acceptance of her mirror image as such: "I have to believe that when I look away, my mirror image also looks away".

But now we are to learn that, in spite of that, Donna's mirror image stubbornly has retained a life of its own. At home Donna has painted a frame on her mirror – with grass on the foreground, and a rose-garden boundary all around, and she lives her life in front of this mirror, imagining that, from this "garden behind the mirror", a gaze silently witnesses everything she does: and this is what Ian suddenly is confronted with the moment they first share a room: Donna wants to sleep with her mirror image instead of sleeping with him.

Ian immediately adopts a firm attitude – personifying - on the one hand the master signifier: "that's out of the question!" and on the other hand the knowledge: he enters into a scientific discussion with Donna about her "reflection obsession".

The result of this confrontation with Ian is rather ambiguous. According to Donna herself, this time the result is more than a purely intellectual acceptance that her mirror image has no life of its own, now she "commits herself", as she says, "to ending the emotional addiction to the mirror world". And as a first statement she completely paints over the mirror with the painted frame she used to live secretly in front of and in the meanwhile recites Ian's, "it's only a reflection".

So Donna's mirror image is not any longer animated but if we listen carefully to what she says then we discover that Donna simply has adopted Ian's imaginary, she has adopted his own very private alternative for an animated mirror image – I mean his symmetry-obsession.

Donna adopts Ian's symmetry-obsession – albeit in a more dynamic form, a form that she calls "relative symmetry": for her it is perfectly possible that something is not symmetrical, but then this asymmetry

has to be mirrored by an inverse asymmetry in something else.

Now, as a result of this replacement of her own mirror image by Ian's imaginary, it seems, Donna, for the first time, acquires a *body of her own*.

You may recall that something of the kind had already happened on the occasion of her first crush on Shaun, the Welsh "alcoholic schizophrenic". At that time Donna suddenly had this feeling of "his body blowing through my own body" which means that this relation did not yet provide her with a consistent body, if I may say so, but only with a kind of outer shell, with an empty container – which, of course, is not insignificant.

Now, in relation to Ian, Donna also develops an "inner body sense", as she calls it.

This inner body sense is based on the exchange of her imaginary for Ian's imaginary but as always with Donna, this change too presupposes a preliminary reorganisation of the field of knowledge – which comes about through, once again, a kind of "scientific" discussion.

The materialisation, so to speak, of this inner body sense takes place in a sudden chain reaction – a chain reaction of what we can call "body events". Suddenly Donna ejaculates: "something awful is happening: I want to walk!" whereupon she puts her hand upon her leg and for the first time has this inner feeling of her hand and her leg at the same time. Before she only had awareness of one part of her body at a time and from that moment on there's no holding her, no holding her body, bit by bit all parts of her body are felt together from the inside – and merge until finally Donna can exclaim: "I have a body, a body that I feel from the inside!"

Note that this whole process remains very uncanny to her she compares it to "an alien acquiring humaneness". It's interesting to see how this "inner body sense" immediately affects her "outer body sense".

She does not have any longer this feeling of always being exactly as big as the other people in her company but now for the first time she realises how small and frail she really is. So, the autistic sameness

of Donna with her partner makes her exchange her own mirror image for his imaginary symmetry-obsession and this results in the creation of a body of her own. So far this represents the salutary effects of the autistic sameness.

The Common War Against the ‘Characters’ and the Construction of Body-Movements and a Voice of Their Own

Indeed, this autistic sameness also has some rather uncomfortable effects. In fact, it creates huge complications with the little everyday things of their life together, of their *autisme à deux*. In the beginning their relationship is mainly based upon supporting the other during his or her episodes of Big Black Nothingness. When one of the two suffers from “emotional overload”, from “the return of *jouissance* on the border”, the other is always there as a border guard, to rescue him or her and this basically benefits their relationship.

The couple only starts to run into difficulties when, after some time, they decide to join forces against the characters too – from that moment on their relationship will start deteriorating.

You remember how these characters, Willy and Carol, in specific circumstances, compulsively popped up with their stored or ready-made actions and speech.

You also remember that, due to Bartak’s mythical “Things need a nervous system in order to think or feel”, Donna had lived a crumbling of these characters.

But, as I already announced, these characters finally turned out to have survived this unmasking. The moment Donna is confronted with the omnipresence of Ian’s unimpaired characters, her own characters Willie and Carol return massively and at that moment Donna, for the first time, realises that all these characters actually are – I quote – “defenses against our own wants”. You could say that here we witness a first wary awareness of Lacanian “desire”. The word “want”, meaning “lack of something”, is Jacques-Alain Miller’s translation of

the French word *désir*.

Anyway, from that moment on Donna urges Ian to fight in unison against both their characters, against both their compulsive stored actions and speech. A common fight consisting of two stages, with two successive aims. The first stage or aim is the destruction of the compulsive stored actions and speech and the construction of a body and a voice of their own. The second stage or aim is the identification of "wants" of their own and this is where things get out of hand. From that moment on, their *autisme à deux* gets bogged down completely in what we could call "a collective obsessional neurosis".

At the first stage of their common struggle against the stored actions and speech of their characters, Donna and Ian continually alert each other: "mind! this is not you doing or saying this, but this or that character of yours!" Sometimes this takes on rather hysterical forms. Take for instance the spaghetti-scene. Ian spills spaghetti on the floor and immediately wants to clean up the mess but Donna holds him back, "don't! It's not you who wants to clean up the mess, it's that over neat character of yours!", whereupon she smacks all of the spaghetti down on the floor. At that moment Ian feels delivered of that over neat character of his and delirious with excitement, both start a spaghetti-throwing slapstick fight. Anyway, leaving this hysterical theatre aside, their mutual alerting to the characters does have some rather drastic consequences: their stored actions and speech fall apart and a new body and a voice are constructed.

Before going more deeply into that, first an important preliminary remark. Contrary to what we are used to in the Lacanian approach of psychosis, for instance of Schreber's paranoia, the first register to be affected in the autistic case of Donna is the imaginary. First stored actions fall apart and a new body is constructed. This applies to Donna as well as to Ian. It is only in a second time it seems, that the symbolic is affected: that stored speech falls apart and that a new voice is constructed which is only the case for Donna, not for Ian!

So, first of all, the stored actions of the characters fall apart, which is a rather eye-catching phenomenon. On the one hand the characters

seem to withdraw themselves out of the stored actions, but only half-way, if I may say so: "actions are aborted midsentence, as if someone switched off the electricity". For instance "an arm remains suspended in the air ... waiting for further direction". As a result, her actions come to resemble "a series of stills". On the other hand the characters seem to prop up no more but half of her body I quote: "each limb does a different unsynchronized scene-fragment" – which makes Donna walk clumsily, like two uncoordinated halves: her left leg is not moved any longer by a stored action, while her right leg still is. The overall result of this falling apart of stored actions is immobilisation. Donna feels stuck in a dysfunctional body, sighing that "at least stored actions were still functional".

And she is seized by panic: "what if my body turns out not to have any actions of its own at all?"

From that moment on, in this state of panic, the construction of a body of her own can take off. You remember that, for Donna, this is already the second time that something of the kind happens: at the outset of their relation, she had distanced herself from her mirror image and instead had adopted Ian's symmetry-obsession – and, as consequence, she had acquired an "inner body sense".

Now this process, of acquiring an inner body sense, seems to repeat itself a second time – this time with the explicit cooperation of Ian: he encourages her verbally, he physically assists her. And in this way Donna succeeds in stirring herself once again bit by bit, limb by limb, in a chain reaction of body events: take for instance, once again, her legs.

To start with Donna always had this feeling of having rubber legs, for instance: at the age of 6, she could sit for hours with her legs behind her head, like a contortionist – that was the position her mother enjoyed her putting into. Now, after the falling apart of stored actions, she suddenly feels one of her legs from the inside: "*I have a leg!*" but this leg cannot yet be felt and used at the same time: "*my leg won't listen!*". But this next step is not long in coming: she succeeds in using that leg; one could even say that she inhabits her leg. But now the

articulation of this felt leg, this leg of her own with the hip, proves to be problematic – which makes her walk with jerky motions. The same process of appropriation, resulting in ugly movements, is experienced in her arms, and other parts of her body.

So, the end result of this engaging with her body is that Donna displays all kinds of ugly movements – but at least, as she says, “these ugly movements are mine”, these are the movements of a body of her own. By the way, there is also a very interesting side-effect to this construction of her own body, of her own movements - her “autistic gaze” is affected by it.

Previously her gaze was divided: one side of her face looked “blank and lost, the eye looking intensely into nothingness”: while the other side of her face was “smiling, the eye turned inside” as it were – in order to enjoy the “sensing”, the being hypnotised by the play of lights and colours in her head.

Now, after finding her own body, Donna realises when she turns that one eye inside, she realises when she starts losing herself into the enjoyment of sensing – and now she is able to make a conscious effort to direct that eye outwards, looking forward to where her new body makes its way. In Lacanian concepts we could say that from that moment on she is able to operate a conscious “extraction” of the gaze as an object.

So Donna has a body of her own. Nevertheless the relation with that body remains strained: movements are terribly exhausting: opening her eyes in the morning is a day’s work in itself and on top of that, she has to practice all of these movements constantly.

Now let us turn to the other side of the characters, to their stored speech. Here also we first witness a falling apart of stored speech – followed by the construction of a new voice, of a voice of her own with this particularity and that this is only the case on Donna’s side. Ian’s speech, the speech of his characters, remains intact! So on this particular point, of the construction of a voice of her own, Donna is on her own.

First there is a falling apart of the stored speech. Until that moment

Donna's speech was characterised by on the one hand, Willie's crispness, on the other hand, Carol's drawl. Now this two-headed speech-machine starts to falter in a kind of bottom-up chain reaction: first Donna experiences problems at the level of the diaphragm, followed immediately by successive problems with the larynx, the tongue, the jaws, the lips. The consequences of this faltering of the speech-machine are felt on two levels: The levels of;

Voice

Donna loses control over the pitch, the pace and the intonation of her voice and

Language

Her language loses its grammatical structure and becomes a "mosaic" of disconnected elements – Donna talks incoherently.

The overall result of this falling apart of stored speech is mutism and once again Donna is seized by panic: unable to find speech-files of her own to replace the stored ones, she asks herself "what if the voice I had gone in search of, my own voice, had never spoken?"

In that state of panic Donna lives the slow and painful construction of a voice of her own which is made possible thanks to an imaginary and a symbolic point of support, among other things: on the one hand there is Ian who unflinchingly continues to coach and encourage her and who introduces a temporary body or sign-language. On the other hand Donna also benefits from her linguistic studies, and the "scientific knowledge" about the speech-machine she acquired at that time: "I know how to put my tongue and lips and so on ..."

So, with a little imaginary help from her friend and some symbolic support from science, Donna gradually gains control over the production of "meaning" and she can say what she wants to say and in the process, suddenly, hears her own voice – for the first time of her life.

An ugly voice ... but at least it's her voice: "my voice", I said, crying" uncontrollably, "Donna's voice". This was the voice of no one I had ever known ...". This voice is immediately recycled in the

imaginary register, “in spite of its aesthetic ugliness, it’s overwhelmingly beautiful”.

But Donna’s relation with her own voice remains strained all the same as speaking in that own voice remains very exhausting and she continually has to fine-tune her speech-machine.

Nevertheless, finding their own body and, for Donna, finding her own voice, leads to a common commitment for Ian and Donna: henceforth they will only act and speak of their own accord, out of their own “wants”.

Indeed, Donna and Ian now have their own bodies and Donna now has her own voice. But to what use? What can they do with these bodies? What can she say with that voice? And off they go, in a quest of what they really want, a quest of what they really want to do, a quest of what she really wants to say.

Indeed, the second stage of Donna’s and Ian’s collective struggle against the stored actions and speech becomes a final struggle for “wants” of their own.

The Checking Procedure and the Failure of the Construction of Wants of Their Own

The first question of course is how do you recognise “wants” of your own? How can you be sure to speak and act out of your own wants? For Donna the infallible sign of the imminence of a “want” is the fact that she feels a genuine “emotion” while acting or speaking. Only a genuine emotion guarantees that an action or statement complies with a want of her own; that it’s not some character who is acting or speaking. Where does this idea of emotion as a criterion for a real “want” come from? We have to bear in mind that for Donna – at that time, prior to her own reflections on autism – one of the basic problems of autism is alexithymia. Alexithymia, a term coined by Sifneos in 1973, literally means “no words for emotions” – and usually is defined as “the inability to identify and describe emotions in the self and in

others". According to Donna this alexithymia applies to autists like Ian and herself, insofar as they act and speak through characters. Remember that for Donna, the Big Black Nothingness corresponded to a shutting down of her "system", due to an "emotional overload" – "return of *jouissance*", we would say, with Eric Laurent. So by means of their characters, autists defend themselves against such an "emotional overload", against the massive "return of *jouissance*" and now Donna and Ian have decided to allow the return this dangerous "emotion", that dangerous "enjoyment", of their own accord. A huge risk, but the only way to establish a trustworthy signal that a particular statement or action complies with a "want" of their own. So it is extremely important for them that they control this return of emotion. So to this end they invent a kind of "checking procedure". Everything they want to do first has to be stated in a twofold manner: "Donna wants X". "Donna does not want X". They have to say so for themselves, but they can also do so for the other. And then they have to wait for the "emotional feedback" on both statements. Either there's no emotional feedback at all; what they want to do or say is neutral with regard to what they really "want". When it does come to an emotional feedback, this can take the form of two bodily phenomena: the lightening up of the face signals that the intended action or statement complies with a "want" of their own or the feeling of a hand squeezing together the bowels signals that the intended action or statement goes against a "want" of their own.

The point of this checking procedure is that Donna and Ian agree to get rid of anything they respond to with such a "negative emotion" – because it means that it goes against a "want" of their own. And so Donna and Ian start checking all they say and do which of course very soon creates a slightly paranoid atmosphere. They continually spy upon themselves and each other – looking for clues of stored speech or actions and as a result both become "increasingly disturbed when the other appears to be indulging in something that had not been checked". In this way really everything is checked for the presence of real "wants", nothing is sacred, their daily routines; eating, dressing,

television watching, social contacts, and so on are checked for “real wants”.

But this is also the case for their burgeoning “sexual attraction” to each other. I will come back to that. The result of all this checking is first of all that, about everything Donna and Ian say or do, does not provoke any emotional response at all – and, when it does, it is negative – which means that they do not act or speak out of “wants” of their own, but simply out of the automatisms of their characters. Consequently nearly everything they possess is thrown out: clothes, food, household stuff... and even their so-called friends. After this massive clearance, this *auto-da-fe* of their objects, they are ready to acquire everything anew – but this time in line with “wants” of their own, and thus it happens that they have to perform their checking procedure in the outside world, in shops – much to the bewilderment of shop assistants. In any case, in this blatant way Donna succeeds in “constructing” for instance a breakfast of her own: “the unknown breakfast that I was unaware of wanting – my breakfast – the breakfast I can enjoy”.

All's well that ends well? Well, not really ...Very soon the checking procedure gets bogged down completely in a kind of “collective obsessional neurosis.” Gradually they come to realise that the checking procedure has been ... infiltrated by the characters. It is not Donna or Ian who check their speech and actions, it is not Donna or Ian who perform the emotional responses – but it is the characters that do so. They surreptitiously identify with the word “I” in the statements and make Donna and Ian mispronounce the words of the statements, making them meaningless or ambiguous for them. Take for instance the way Donna and Ian get rid of Ian's beloved old-timer, a Volvo, and buy another car that turns out to be ready for the scrap heap. A quick check reveals that “one of Ian's characters had compelled him to act like he loved that miserable old car” – and so they get rid of it. Another quick check signals that what they really want is a land rover – which they immediately buy – too hastily as it soon appears: the thing is ready for the scrap heap.

At that moment it starts to dawn on Donna that, in this particular case, the checking procedure might have been infiltrated by one of her own characters – I mean Willie, the he-man, who always had lusted after such a husky land rover and that, as a final result, she does not find a car of her own either, she does not find “the unknown car that I was unaware of wanting – my car – the car I can enjoy” – if I may paraphrase her. What this awkward experience with the car makes her aware of is that there is always a fair chance that all that checking only leads to simulated “emotions”, that all the “wants” identified in this way are but travesties of “common rules”, as Donna says. The result of all that checking might be pure semblance.

In a desperate attempt to counter this infiltration of the “checking procedure” by the characters, to counter this treat of their “wants” becoming pure semblance, Donna and Ian develop of a kind of collective obsessional neurosis – that manifests itself in different registers:

Time

- they start checking and checking all over again or
- they wait for a determined time span before proceeding with the first check.

Language

- they perform different operations on the statements of the checking procedure for instance: “I – meaning me, Donna, and not my defenses – want X ...
- ... and when I say X I mean xxxx” – articulating every syllable painstakingly.

Voice

- Of course the voice also plays its part in this obsessional attempt at control:
- either the statements have to be pronounced internally so that the partner – and his ‘characters’ – cannot hear them.
- or, on the contrary, in public the statements have to be shouted out.

- and finally there's also a typical attempt at taking up a kind of meta-stand ...
- ... by first checking for their own wants: "Donna wants X".
- ... and then also checking for the characters' wants: "my defenses want X".

But finally it appears that in this obsessional way the characters cannot be checked either. So the only honourable and endurable solution seems to be a truce, a truce consisting of, "kindly confronting the characters in a personally detached and non challenging way" – which means that Donna and Ian do not give way to the characters, but nevertheless give them the feeling "that they'd been listened to by 'someone' not so obviously 'against them'". Later on Donna will bluntly admit that all that checking finally had been in vain and that the "wants" identified in this "emotional" way really were but *semblants*.

But let us turn now to the field where this final failure of the *autisme à deux* in the case of Donna reveals itself in the most disturbing way – that is to say sexuality.

An Asexual Sexual Rapport

When it comes to sexuality, I recall that Donna immediately had this feeling of a "rapport" with Ian – and that I suggested that this feeling would be based on their shared asexuality. At first sight this rapport in itself has nothing sexual about it, it is a matter of "simply being" ... not "being for each other", as man and woman but – with the words of Donna – "being with our own selves in each other's company". To me this "simply being" seems to be a form of sexual rapport – precisely because it is based on both their very outspoken "asexuality". Indeed, both present themselves explicitly as "asexual", neither of them has any interest in sexuality, any sense of sexuality, "we are like children", they claim.

I will not go into that asexuality now, but we turn immediately to

the complications of this “asexually based sexual rapport”, complications which are not long in coming.

Donna notes how she and Ian gradually approach each other under the terms of an “accidental touching myth”. For instance we witness a whole scramble of buying and moving single beds, resulting in making them sleep closer and closer to each other – but “only temporary and only for practical arrangement”.

And this just goes on and on, until suddenly both of them come to “the horrifying realisation of a craving that is absolutely forbidden”. We could say that something of the drive, of the *pulsion* crops up.

From that point on, confronted with this craving, the famous checking procedure is mobilised.

“Do we feel a genuine positive emotion when we want to touch each others body?”

“Do we really want to do this?” In spite of the usual obsessional complications, this checking of the mutual sexual attraction does result in what Donna calls “a hole in our self-definitions as ‘asexual’”. We would call this a “partial sexualisation”. On the one hand, touch gets a sexual colour with their fingers, jaws, noses, the lovers explore each others faces and hair, each others “outlines and curves” and “where the parts of the body come together, how the other body is joined “like a blind feels a sculpture” – says Donna. But on the other hand, there is not the slightest evidence of sexualisation of the sexual act itself – the sexual act itself remains “impossible”.

What strikes one most is the fact that the sexual act itself is never subjected to the checking procedure – Donna and Ian do not come to the point, to the point where they would be compelled to check whether the idea of the coitus provokes a genuine positive emotion, where they would be able to check whether there’s a real “want” for “that”. So the coitus remains a “stored action”, a “performance”, a matter of “going through the motions” – from which they are now excluded. They do not come to “the unknown coitus we were unaware of wanting – our coitus – the coitus we can enjoy” – to paraphrase Donna once again.

At that point, head over heels, Donna and Ian rush into marriage as a result of this hole in their self-definitions as “asexual” but also, it seems, as a kind of automatic effect of the mythical moment when they “see” each other for the first time – literally!

We should bear in mind that Donna and Ian both are hampered by serious visual problems – Donna calls this their “sensory hypersensitivity”. This “sensory hypersensitivity” consists in a double inability: the inability to see objects, faces, bodies as a coherent whole. This is called “simultagnosia” and subsequently the inability to give meaning to those fragmented images. For instance they cannot “read” facial expressions, to them meaning clearly is a matter of *Gestalt*. The result of these double inability is “sensory overload”.

I refer to the recurrent episodes of Big Black Nothingness. One fine day an alternative treatment of these visual problems forces a kind of visual breakthrough.

A so-called scientific diagnosis is made: Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (SSS!) which greatly relieves both of them: “suddenly all the pieces fall into places”.

And, in line with this diagnosis, an experimental colour-therapy is proposed.

Donna already had experienced the healing qualities of colours for herself: she’s already aware that orange-red light makes her “more alert and aware” – and so she already wore tinted glasses at the time.

The colour-therapy immediately pays off, with some astonishing results. On the one hand coloured plastic sheets enable her for the first time to “read directly and consciously and effortlessly”.

Not only does Donna understand what is written – it has a whole meaning - but, more importantly, she also enjoys reading! She reads – as she says “with a flow and an intonation that came naturally from reading something that I could imagine and was entertained by”. Remember that Donna’s basic autistic *jouissance* has to do with colours, with being hypnotised by the play of lights and colours, so it’s only thanks to the “additive” of this autistic *jouissance* that she becomes able to understand and to enjoy what she is reading.

On the other hand tinted lenses at one go induce a spectacular visual *Gestalt*-effect.

Suddenly for the first time Donna perceives Ian as a whole: “your face, it’s joined together, your head, it is joined to your body all at once!” Remarkably this visual *Gestalt*-effect also has repercussions in other sensory registers, on the overload in the auditory register: background noise becomes less disturbing to Donna and she’s not any longer startled by any unforeseen noise.

But the main effect of the fact that for the first time Donna and Ian perceive each other as a whole, is that, as already mentioned, they rush into marriage.

...and they lived happily ever after?

Homosexuality and Asperger Against Asexuality and “Real Autism”

Not really! In Book III Donna writes, “Like colour to the blind. Soul searching and soul finding”, does culminate in a hopeful and even jubilant mood: Donna is convinced that Ian has “continuous awareness of my existence at all times” – even when he sleeps. Ian, or her relation of relative symmetry with Ian, has become the mirror in front of which she performs her life and this is what makes her sure of her existence. But the epilogue to that same book suddenly strikes a completely different note: one year after writing this book the couple is already divorced.

We could dismiss this unexpected turn with a general ironic remark on marriage such as basing ourselves on Donna’s own comment: “we started a journey together, but never checked the tickets”. But, from a clinical point of view, it is much more instructive to follow the falling apart, the deconstruction even, of the *autisme à deux* in Donna’s blog, and in her comments on her marriage.

In Donna’s blog we witness how the word or diagnosis of

“autism”, no longer functions as a master signifier that keeps them together: Ian is not any longer a “real autist”, he’s an Asperger.

Ian is an Aspie – characterised among other things by alexithymia, by not having words for his emotions, by intellectualising. Donna is an Autie – characterised by “sensing”, by wallowing in colours and lights. On the other hand, as an Asperger,

Ian is imputed all kinds of personality disorders. You should bear in mind that at that time Donna is embarking upon her own theory of autism, of “real autism”, as a “fruit salad” – and that one of the basic assumptions of this theory is that autism is incompatible with personality disorders – such as:

- schizoid personality disorder
- narcissistic personality disorder
- multiple personality disorder
- obsessive compulsive personality disorder

Donna’s blog also casts a completely different light on their sexuality. There we learn that the turning point in their *autisme à deux*, has been the completely unexpected “coming out” of Ian as homosexual, which Donna instantly mirrored in a lesbian *intermezzo*. In this lesbian relationship – which she describes as *torrid* – Donna for the first time flourishes sexually and it is only afterwards that Donna is able to face up to the truth of her sexual desire.

She confesses that she never really developed a sexual bond with Ian: they did touch each other, yes, but this was not “touch as bonding”. And the statement, in the checking procedure, “Donna wants to be married ...” was true – but not about Ian. As a matter of fact this statement did not say who she wanted to be married to – and now, looking back, she realises that it was to her first love, the Welshman Shaun. So the whole sexual thing with Ian, as constructed by the checking procedure, and their marriage, as precipitated by the image of each other as a whole, actually had functioned as a semblance. A semblance – but nevertheless “a functional one”,

as Donna herself remarks: in the relationship with Ian, in their *autisme à deux*, she created for herself a mirror in front of which she was able to perform everything that was “functional to live”.

Nevertheless, the breach in their asexuality and the breach between Ian’s Asperger’s and what Donna comes to consider as her “real autism” will make their *autisme à deux* fall apart. And from that moment on Donna will be able to free her self, if I may say so, from autism as a Master Signifier. But this Fourth Period in Donna Williams’ autism, and her treatment of it, is what I will examine in the second part of this paper.

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