

PREFACE

Hardly a month goes by without a new article or a television special about Asperger Syndrome. We are told that it's the fastest-growing psychiatric condition among the children of Silicon Valley (where it's been called "the geek syndrome"); that tens of thousands of children and adults suffer from it; and that the lofty Thomas Jefferson probably had it, too. If people have heard of one psychiatric condition other than schizophrenia, it's often the subtlest form of autism known as Asperger Syndrome, a sometimes poetic deformation of the mind that turns people into solitary misfits but that also makes them virtuosos—sometimes of valued skills, but often of madly irrelevant obsessions. Asperger Syndrome has become unexpectedly fashionable. More, it has become perhaps the first *desirable* syndrome of the twenty-first century: a terrible burden, yes, but also a proof of eccentric intelligence, of genius, even—and at the very least, of that increasingly rare commodity, individuality.

Even the tiniest Asperger boy can often be a walking *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on different species of cicadas, obscure clock-manufacturing companies, telephone cable insulating firms, the passenger list of the *Titanic*, baseball trivia from 1921, say, to 1922, or the provincial capitals of Brazil. In one documented case, a child memorized the addresses, telephone numbers, and zip codes of every member of Congress, while one family of a Long Island Asperger child had to make continual diversions in order to visit the site of the TWA airline disaster. Another three-year-old Asperger boy disassembled and reassembled a refrigerator motor. Very amusing. But Asperger Syndrome also afflicts me with a distinct unease: it remains so difficult to diagnose, so restlessly vague. And, worse still, it strikes too close to home.

I find that, when I look at the matter closely, I am sure (or at least half sure) that the symptoms of this now *à la mode* syndrome are already familiar to me. Admittedly, I knew nothing when I was a child about deep-fat friers, and even then I was stonily indifferent to the phone numbers of politicians. But I did know all the tank designs used by General Guderian on the Eastern Front in 1941, and at the age of nine I

knew by heart the complicated sex lives of all the characters in *The Odyssey*. Was I mad?

As it happens, in the psychiatric Tower of Babel which America is fast becoming, perhaps all of us can consider the case of the Asperger loner with more than a slight misgiving. Who among us does not have strange little compulsions and obsessions, which, while not exactly awarding us membership in the Asperger's club, certainly must give us pause about our normality? Yet there is, of course, a great difficulty in writing about psychiatry. I am not a psychiatrist and neither, most probably, are you. We wonder to ourselves if we even have the right to entertain opinions concerning this intricate, not to say mystifying, science, if indeed it is a science. But here's the rub. The object of this science is ourselves and our normality. That is to say, our basic nature. Do we actually possess our normality, or (a distinctly less attractive possibility) does *it* in fact possess *us*? About this, we can hardly fail to hold a view.

I would probably never have set out on a journey into the topsyturvy Land of Asperger's if I hadn't been tormented by this ominous question, which of course has no obvious answer. All that exists is the journey itself, which was conducted in the spirit of a merrily admitted ignorance. After all, the experts have already spoken on this curious subject, and what they have to say is widely available. What I wanted on this voyage, this road trip, was to visit the places and people hidden, often in plain sight: not just experts, or caregivers, or even just children, but Asperger people (if they can be called that) living out their very lives. What I wanted, in short, was merely to let a journey speak for itself. The characters met on the way, after all, were not psychiatric oddities, dark goblins inhabiting the infamous *Diagnostic Manual*, but only varying intense and wayward variations of myself.