

Autism in Literature

The Negotiation between Syndrome and Silent Wisdom

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Lit 480

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Spring, 2010

Introduction

The first day I worked at a summer camp for severely autistic teenagers, I was overwhelmed. I walked into the cafeteria and found fifty kids my own age moaning, rocking, hand flapping, or covering their ears and staring into space. Yet, for the next four years, I never once missed a day of summer camp. Like so many others exposed to people with the condition, I was compelled to figure out autism. In the kids that I worked with, I saw the seemingly irreconcilable combination of insight and profound disability, and it never left my mind.

However, as the months went by, I began to realize that autism did not lend itself to being figured out. First, I felt limited in what I could learn about autism from those who experienced it because the nature of the condition precluded their verbal explanations of themselves. This obvious fact morphed into an emotionally trying problem as I was faced with autistic kids under my supervision having explosive outbursts of tears or even violence for reasons that were often completely inaccessible to me. Second, even the scientific literature on autism had very few definitive conclusions. Though the cognitive limitations of those with autism are reasonably well-documented, comparatively little is known about mechanisms that cause the condition, and individual treatments are not consistently effective (Boucher, 10).

This pairing of fascination and frustration is exactly what makes the topic of autism fuel for creative expression. Perspectives on autism in popular literature differ from those found in scientific texts in that they generally lean toward neurodiversity, or the belief that autism is a different but equally valid way of looking at the world, rather than psychopathology. Scientific texts on autism emphasize the psychopathology of the condition, framing it as a disability or disorder and defining it in terms of deficits. This emphasis on neurodiversity has arisen as a result of dissatisfaction with the unfolding of scientific knowledge about autism. Particularly,

neurodiversity in literature is a reaction to the decidedly negative and deterministic view scientific authorities have of autism and the fact that though we continue to discover useful information about the cognitive abilities of those with autism, the disorder's exact definition and causes still elude us (Boucher, 98).

My investigation into this topic has implications for understanding the interaction between science and creative expression. On the topic of autism, literature becomes a vehicle for questioning the attitudes and conclusions of psychologists. Literature that deals with the label of autism takes on some of the rhetoric of psychologists but uses this rhetoric to develop narratives in which autism is a form of alterity that is not necessarily a sickness.

At the same time that neurodiversity seen in literature opens up the possibility of valuing autism, it could also be limiting in that it prescribes essentially only one aspect of the experience of autism that can be valuable. Modern portrayals of autism in literature repeatedly emphasize “savants,” or autistic people who also have an extraordinary talent or ability. While savantism does make for a compelling narrative, the attraction to it as a topic inextricably linked to autism seems to indicate that the value of an autistic person is measured only by the extent to which they have an extraordinary talent coupled with their condition. This kind of thinking both limits the self-determination of the autistic savant and ignores the other 90% of people who have autism (Heaton, 900).

The majority of people with autism, for whom the condition is coupled with developmental delay and makes functioning in our society difficult, are neglected by portrayals of autism that pay attention to only a “high-functioning” minority of those who have the condition. This neglect of those with more severe autism was the source of disconnect between the autistic people I know and the characters about whom I read. Although it would seem that

disability narratives are ready to address cognitive difference in the form of “high functioning” autism, they continue shy away from autism in more severe forms. In this way, the extent to which literature about autism productively, “engages with the cultural dominant in ways that bolster critique or refute it” (Muller, 118) is somewhat limited by the fact that it only defends the legitimacy of the subjective experiences and the value of a certain type of person with autism. Autistic people like those I have worked with and the scientific conclusions drawn about them are still largely ignored by literature.

Before I continue, it may be useful for me to briefly explain what autism is and the terms in which I plan to discuss it. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by atypical social interaction, atypical communication, and repetitive or restricted behaviors and interests (DSM IV). It is one in a group of conditions called autism spectrum disorders. Autism is distinct from other disorders on the spectrum like Asperger’s syndrome because its diagnostic criteria include all three of the previously mentioned characteristics rather than just two of them (Boucher, 26). For this reason autism is usually regarded as one of the more severe autism spectrum disorders.

From the first time the label was used, autism was framed as pathology. The word autism first appeared in 1912 when a doctor named Eugen Bleuler invented the term to describe the extreme withdrawal from reality he saw among his schizophrenic patients (OED). He probably derived the term from the Greek word αὐτός (autos), meaning self. Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner each separately began using the word autism to describe children that modern psychologists would recognize as having autism spectrum disorders in 1938 and 1943. The term came to be used interchangeably with such previously stigmatized phrases as “infantile

schizophrenia” or “autistic psychopathy” until the 1970’s when diagnostic criteria for autism were gradually solidified (Boucher, 10).

Though autism is highly heterogeneous and varies widely in its severity, it is usually understood to be a disorder or disability and defined in terms of the apparent deficits associated with it. Autism is seen as a serious problem worthy of enormous efforts to “fix” it. Most autism advocacy groups enthusiastically support research for cures (Autism Speaks), and millions of dollars are pumped into autism research every year with this ultimate goal in mind (National Institutes of Health). In addition, the news media often portrays autism as a frightening and tragic phenomenon. The word “epidemic” is often attached autism in sensationalist articles about the growing number of diagnoses (Kogan, 2007).

However, since the 1990’s a minority of people who either have autism or are very close to someone with autism have begun to question the assumption that it is pathological. These people would describe themselves as proponents of neurodiversity, or the belief that people with autism simply have different, though not inferior, ways of experiencing the world. Michel Foucault preceded the neurodiversity movement in his book *Madness and Civilization*, which discussed how notions of insanity over the course of history are more likely to indicate the social conditions of a particular time and place than any objective reality of mental illness. Thomas Szasz took this idea a few steps further in *The Myth of Mental Illness* by claiming that all supposed mental illnesses are manufactured for the purpose of impinging upon the personal freedom of those who are not normal. Both of these texts question the “sickness” interpretation of deviant behaviors and raise the possibility that those who behave in unusual ways simply engage in valid, alternative manners of thinking. While neither wrote anything specific to autism, Foucault and Szasz are important to this project because they established bases on which

to question psychology's conclusions about mental illness and disorder. Their doubts on the legitimacy of scientific truths and attitudes toward conditions or behaviors such as schizophrenia paved the way proponents of neurodiversity to doubt those of autism.

The term neurodiversity was first put forth in a *New York Times* article by Harvey Blume in 1990. In the article, Blume compares diverse modes of thought to biodiversity, and claims that the existence of neurological differences among people is critical to the future of humanity because the talents that can emerge in a neurologically diverse population allow humans to thrive in a time when the usefulness of various cognitive abilities is changing. Beyond the possible usefulness of such diversity, many organizations and individuals affiliated with the Autism Rights Movement take an interest in neurodiversity because it promotes a more humanist understanding of autism that holds that autistic existence is valuable just as normal existence is valuable. The autobiographies of Temple Grandin, an autistic savant, best-selling author, and animal behavior expert, are well-known examples of this type of philosophy on autism. Autism advocate Jim Sinclair argues against the search for a cure for autism and many forms of treatment on the basis that autism is an aspect of identity that cannot be separated from an individual without destroying him or her (1).

In this piece, I will adopt the rhetoric of neurodiversity rather than that of a pathological view of autism because I hope to avoid making negative, or even damaging, conclusions about a form of human difference to which I am an outsider. While I am not interested in endorsing the extremes of either viewpoint, the language of neurodiversity is appealing to me because it opens up more possibilities in terms of how autistic thought may be understood. The assumption of mental pathology implied by words like "disorder" is accompanied by a powerful temptation to generalize and interpret all behavior of an individual as a manifestation of sickness (Rosenhan,

252). This generalization is limiting to an outsider seeking to understand autism, and the conclusions derived from it could be unfair to people who have autism. Therefore, I substitute the word “condition” for “disorder,” “characteristic” for “symptom,” “difference” for “deficit,” and “neurotypical” for “normal.”

I seek to explore the ways in which the widespread fascination with autism manifests itself in literature and interpretation. To do this, I will begin by analyzing the way that autism functions in works of literature in which modern critics have identified characters as being autistic. These characters include Bartleby from Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Within this story, the autistic characteristics of Bartleby complicate attempts at complete explanations of the meanings of the narratives. They also, but only secondarily in importance, cause strong emotional reactions in other characters and serve a force to reveal the authentic nature of the people around them. Because of the emphasis on pathology in mainstream ideas about autism, the modern suppositions we impose up these characters if we label them as autistic run the danger of ignoring their agency and importance as individuals. Approaching the characters as autistic in a neurodiverse sense recognizes them as autonomous human beings, but is also potentially limiting in that this outlook denies the validity of any ideas about the characters based on neurotypical assumptions.

I will also examine Mark Haddon’s 2003 novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. *The Curious Incident* both supports and challenges modern psychological literature on autism. The autistic narrator of the story adheres to expectations that coincide with popular understanding of his condition in some parts, but defies them in others. In doing so, he asserts his existence as independent of the constructs that psychologists create to explain him. At the same time, the emphasis placed on his extraordinary skills in the book detracts from its potential

to enhance the possibilities of self-determination for those with autism. The narrator's added genius attracts voyeurism and limits the ways in which he may be valued.

Autism in Pre-1930 Literature

In this work, I will analyze the impact that retrospectively attaching the label of autism to a character from a work written before the label existed has to the interpretation of this work. To this end, I will critically examine the justification used for such labeling. The arguments in favor of the possibility of autistic presences in pre-1930 literature are sensible ones with roots in the idea that human difference is a natural and constant interest of literature. It is only when we interpret those autistic presences as being purely pathological that we run into the problems of reducing a character to a label and ignoring their actual complexity. In this way, the retrospective labeling of characters, unfortunately, could encourage the negative, deterministic thinking about autism which modern works that contain the label question.

The combination of unusual behaviors and cognitions we now call autism has been present in a small minority of individuals throughout human history. Long before Hans Asperger gave the condition a name in 1938 (Boucher, 9), people with autism perplexed their friends and family members and haunted the consciousness of society at large with their intellectual otherness. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that autistic presences are detectable in works of fiction that predate the label. In the words of autism expert Uta Frith: "The chilling and fascinating combination of childhood innocence and disturbance cries out for symbolic elaboration" (*Autism*, 18).

It may seem counterintuitive or questionable to associate a character in an older text with a condition that was not named in either the character's or the author's time. First, there are

some who claim that autism did not exist for long before its identification in 1938. These people usually point to twentieth century environmental toxins and vaccines as the etiological, or first, causes of autism (Wakefield, 460). However, the evidence suggesting that environmental toxins and vaccines are linked to autism is weak, especially when compared to the evidence of a genetic basis for the condition. Researchers have paid special attention to the media-sensationalized suspicion that the MMR vaccine may cause autism, but no statistically significant connection has been uncovered (Chen, Landau, Sham, & Fombonne, 2004; Klein & Diehl, 2004; Doja & Roberts, 2006; Richler et al., 2006; Uchiyama, Kurosawa, & Inaba, 2007). However, there is strong support for a genetic basis of autism, including a 90% concordance rate for autism among monozygotic twins (Boucher, 118). Where one identical twin has autism, the other one will also have the condition 90% of the time. This fact has led some researchers to describe autism as, "...one of the most heritable complex genetic disorders in psychiatry" (Veenstra-VanDerWelle, 116). The evidence of a genetic basis for autism lends itself to speculation that the susceptibility genes for the condition have trickled through the human population for thousands of years, occasionally producing people that we now recognize as autistic.

Another important reservation to consider is one of retrospective diagnosis. Some would suggest that considering examples of autism in works created before the condition was named is inappropriate because autism, and many other mental disorders for that matter, are socially constructed phenomena. According to this viewpoint, no person or character from before the twentieth century could possibly have been autistic, per se, because it is only the labeling done by a one's contemporaries that gives one any particular disability or disorder. However, regardless of the presence of the label, it is highly likely that there has always been a small minority of people who, for biological reasons, possessed the combination of characteristics we

now call autism. Our knowledge of autism and its actual existence are independent things. The strength of the evidence for biological bases of autism differentiate it from disorders distinct to a particular period and place that literary critic Elaine Showalter calls “mimetic” (15). Autism is not what Showalter describes as a “socially permissible expression of distress” when she refers to hysteria (15). Even the author of the book *Constructing Autism*, Majia Nadesan concedes that the label of autism arose from “...biologically based, but socially shaped and expressed behavioral and cognitive differences” (79). Despite being in the midst of an argument that autism is a social construct, she must acknowledge the existence of biological evidence for it. While the word “autism” was an invention of the twentieth century, people who had the behavioral and cognitive differences characteristic of the condition have been around much longer, and their peculiarities have been noticed by their neurotypical contemporaries.

Because literature is interested in the definition of the self through the demarcation of “others” (Thompson, 8), the historically present autistic population must have received attention in literature as a group of intellectual “others” by which normalcy could be understood. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues that our fascination with disability in the cultural arena is part of an indirect investigation into the “veiled subject position of the self” (8). It can be argued, then, that reflections on autism in literature are widespread because of a search for a definition of cognitive normalcy. I seek to explore the ways in which autistic presences reveal themselves in literature from before the term itself appeared. The first part of this analysis will establish that autistic presences are perceivable in each text. I use the phrase “autistic presence” because I hope to avoid the temptations and problems of retrospective diagnosis. Modern diagnoses of historical figures are often made on flimsy evidence that fails to account for social and cultural differences or to address the interpretive consequences that

diagnoses have. They may also be disrespectful in that the attribution of a label may trivialize the achievements of historical figures. Oliver Sacks warns against such, “medicalising our predecessors, reducing their complexity to expression of neurological or psychiatric disorder” (Sacks, 254). This kind of warped thinking leads to absurd conclusions like, “Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel as he did because he had a severe case of obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

Retrospective diagnosis is even less appropriate when applied to characters in a work of fiction. Claiming that a character has a specific condition involves the enormous assumption that the author willfully and accurately modeled that character off actual people with the condition. It turns the author into a mere recorder of real life and ignores his ability to invent. Instead, I will discuss the ways in which a character’s presence is evocative of autism and the effects that the association of the word “autism” with the character has on the interpretation of the text. This approach allows me to evaluate the character in relationship to the concept of autism for the purpose of examining the critical consequences of autism as a label and as a set of peculiar behaviors and cognitions rather than merely making a case that that character merits a potentially blinding label.

In the first part of my analysis, I believe it will be worthwhile to briefly explain how a connection between the character and autism may be drawn from the text. It is helpful to understand why others have associated the label with the character before discussing the critical consequences of that association. Further, it quickly becomes apparent that the aspects of the character that may be considered autistic are also the ones upon which the interpretation of the story hinges.

In the second part of my analysis, I will go beyond writing what neurologist Paul Moebius jokingly termed “pathographies” in of literary characters (Ostwald, 175) by examining the ways in which the echoes of autism in literature affect meaning and interpretation, especially for the modern reader. I am interested in the critical consequences that both the label of autism and the characteristics of autism have for the interpretation of a text. Ultimately, the autistic presences in pre-1930 literature constitute unsolvable, inaccessible characters and lead to the foregrounding of the more typical characters’ fruitless efforts to solve them.

The Autistic Presence of Bartleby

Perhaps the most famous example of the word autism being retrospectively applied to a character in a work of fiction is Bartleby from Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener.” The story details the gradual demise of a mysterious law copyist from the point of view of his employer. Bartleby appears from nowhere with no earthly connections of any kind. At first, he performs his job with spectacular enthusiasm, but later he stops copying altogether and refuses to do anything he is asked with the enigmatic phrase, “I would prefer not to.” Bartleby grimly stares into space for weeks, as his increasingly bewildered employer packs up and moves his office to be rid him. Eventually, Bartleby is arrested for vagrancy and dies in prison.

Readers from literary critics, to historians, to psychologists, to parents of autistic children have taken an interest in diagnosing Bartleby. Indeed, they are not at all mistaken to infer a connection between the behavior of Bartleby and the characteristics of autism. It does not require the misapplied interpretive zeal Dan McCall describes as “readerly self-hypnotism”

(Anderson, 485) to see evidence of the three main criteria for autism described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (IV) present in Bartleby's behavior.

But first, a note on the DSM: Although the DSM is useful in understanding the common characteristics that people with autism share, it is in no way a complete and final authority on the topic. According to autism expert Jill Boucher, the DSM has an intentionally limited definition of autism because it was meant to "identify a minimal set of behavioral characteristics necessary and sufficient for diagnosis of an autism-related condition" (23). This diagnosis is often used to entitle a person to special services, and therefore, to serve this purpose it must define autism as a serious disability. The DSM frames the characteristics of autism in terms of impairments, and therefore it is strongly biased toward a pathological view of autism. I use the criteria of the DSM here because the manual probably contains a fair representation of the neurotypical public's understanding of autism. Just as the reader of Melville's story comes to know Bartleby through the outsider point of view of the narrator, the reader of the DSM comes to know autism through the outsider point of view of the American Psychiatric Association. Moreover, if the specific language the manual uses was slightly changed (for example, by replacing "impairment" with "difference") its statements would be just vague enough to be undeniably accurate of those with autism.

Bartleby exhibits what could easily be construed by the neurotypical as, "qualitative impairments [differences] in social interaction" (DSM IV). The narrator of the story and Bartleby's employer, the lawyer, repeatedly mentions Bartleby's failure to make eye contact or exhibit appropriate posture during verbal encounters. In describing these encounters, the lawyer says "He did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero" (23) and "...he replied with his back still towards me" (27). Bartleby also does not

spontaneously initiate any social interaction. The lawyer says of him, "...he never spoke but to answer" (21). This abnormal pattern of socializing is characteristic of autism, whether one attributes its cause to an impairment, a neurological difference, or simply an unusual disinterest in normal social interaction.

Bartleby may also have "qualitative impairments [differences] in communication" (DSM IV), as demonstrated by his repetitive use of what could be stereotyped language. The best example of this occurs in the following exchange between Bartleby and the Lawyer:

Lawyer: The copies, the copies. We are going to examine them.

Bartleby: I would prefer not to.

Lawyer: *Why* do you refuse?

Bartleby: I would prefer not to.

Lawyers: Every copyist is bound to examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak?

Bartleby: I would prefer not to. (13)

The lack of variation in Bartleby's speech makes it noticeably different from his peers. His second repetition of the words, "I would prefer not to" in this instance especially lends itself to the idea that reciting this phrase is a stereotyped behavior, or stereotypy, for Bartleby because it seems an inappropriate response to the question. He may be repeating it mechanically with little regard to its meaning. Alternatively, Bartleby could simply be understanding and using language differently than most people. The second "I would prefer not to" could refer to his decision not to tell people why he has stopped working. Ultimately, it is not clear whether this phrase reflects impairment or difference.

Bartleby's frequent "dead-wall reveries" (21), in which he stares out a window at a brick wall for long periods of time, are evocative of the "restricted [few and specific] interests or

patterns of behavior” that the DSM associates with autism. The initial energy with which Bartleby obsessively begins copying the lawyer’s documents, day and night, “as if long famished for something to copy” (11), suggests his specific interests may also include copying, at least at the start of the story. Certainly his highly unusual ability or will to focus on this activity contributes to his autistic presence. Bartleby’s refusal to leave the office for any reason may also indicate that he prefers to adhere to an inflexible routine, like many people with autism. When asked to find a new place to work, Bartleby tell his employer, “I like to be stationary” (36).

The Consequences of Bartleby’s Autistic Presence

Any interpretation of “Bartleby the Scrivener” must account for the fact that Bartleby’s only, yet repeated and insistent actions are to assert his will and his presence. To take his eccentricities or autistic presence in an entirely pathological light, one would have to deny his will as an autonomous adult. To ignore it and turn Bartleby into a symbol, one would have to overlook his strong corporeal presence. Both of these interpretive approaches have produced countless articles of criticism on “Bartleby the Scrivener” that sacrifice an important aspect of the character in favor of a seemingly complete explanation for him that falls apart upon further scrutiny. In many ways, Bartleby’s autistic presence acts as a force that complicates interpretation of the story. Bartleby’s unusual behavior announces the existence of an extremely mysterious interior world within the character but also makes that world inaccessible to readers by precluding Bartleby’s representation of himself to others. Approaching Bartleby’s autistic presence with an assumption that autism is a form of neurodiversity may be one way to avoid falling into both the problems of pathologizing Bartleby and of transforming him into a disembodied symbol. In any case, it is important to be self-reflexive about how one approaches

Bartleby because the attachment of a pathology or a symbol to the character can have enormous consequences for not only the interpretation of the story, but the ways in which one understands the particular condition that one associates with him.

For some readers, Bartleby's autistic behavior is pathological. He truly is "...the victim of innate and incurable disorder" (22) as the narrator suggests at one point. The specific term "autism" does not necessarily have to be associated with Bartleby's behavior in order for him to be construed as pathological, but perhaps the label does have the potential to strengthen idea that he is "sick" for people who hold the common assumption that autism is always a severe disability. Certainly, the character Ginger Nut's choice of the word "luny" (14) to describe Bartleby might produce a similar interpretation of the story. It is also possible for one to approach Bartleby with the attitude that he is pathological in the absence of any specific term that implies so, but perhaps a label encourages us to simplify our thinking about people with particular conditions to the point of ignoring the actual complexity of those people.

Readers may take an interest in diagnosing Bartleby with a pathological version of autism from either a psychological or a literary perspective. For psychologists, the idea that Bartleby has autism contributes to the legitimacy of the anxiously clung to assumption that there is a real and unchanging autism. Ashley Kern Koegel uses Bartleby to argue exactly this in her appropriately titled essay, "Evidence Suggesting the Existence of Asperger Syndrome in the Mid-1800s" (270). For Koegel, Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a precious artifact that clearly demonstrates that, "... the disorder did in fact exist long before ASDs were formally characterized" (270). Koegel, a medical school student, rushes to the defense of the field of psychiatry by arguing that the existence of autism is independent of its diagnosis. Mental illnesses and disorders are inherent in certain individuals; psychologists do not invent them and

thereby create problems in people who would otherwise be fine. “Bartleby the Scrivener” becomes part of the defense of psychology as a “hard science” that involves objective observations of reality rather than subjective constructions imposed upon reality. While this manipulation of literature to defend the field of psychology is somewhat limiting, even to the field itself in that it neglects the ways in which social constructs contribute to our understanding of biologically-based cognitive difference, it is the relatively harmless product of ongoing anxiety about the legitimacy of psychology as a science.

Some psychologists have used the story of Bartleby to arrive at more disputable and potentially damaging conclusions. Those with a particularly negative and deterministic view of autism may construe “Bartleby the Scrivener” as evidence that paternalism is needed in dealing with people with autism. Bartleby’s fate of dying alone in jail is one version of the typical morbid doom that autism causes unless the afflicted person is lucky enough to experience an intervention by healthy, normal people. Koegel indicates precisely this when she says, “As implied in Melville’s Bartleby, individuals with ASD had no place in society during the 19th century; however, fortunately for individuals like Bartleby, there are now empirically validated interventions that can improve the symptoms of ASD” (272). She twists Bartleby’s story into a kind of congratulation for modern psychology’s treatment of autism as a sickness. This kind of thinking not only leads to a privileging of modern understanding of human difference, but also subjugates those with autism and denies them agency. The narrator of the story made an ignorant mistake in allowing Bartleby to exercise his will *too much* and thereby destroy himself. Such conclusions could have broad implications for how those with autism are thought of and treated in our society. They neglect the fact that different autistic individuals may require less intervention for their conditions.

For literary critics, to call Bartleby autistic in a pathological sense may be a maneuver of interpretive laziness. This practice allows readers to dismiss the mysterious Bartleby altogether and shift their attention toward more transparent narrator. Bartleby's words and actions can be summed up as the random, useless products of a defective mind, and then he can be ignored. In "Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader," H. Porter Abbott describes such a strategy for coping with mysterious characters as an "opaque stereotype" (450), which explains away a character with simple label that excuses their incomprehensible behavior.

William P. Sullivan, English professor and author of "Bartle and Infantile Autism; A Naturalistic Explanation" provides a rather extreme version of this less than enlightening interpretation of "Bartleby the Scrivener." Sullivan does both Melville and his character, Bartleby, an injustice by reducing the former to an mere imitator who wrote about quirky people he knew and the latter to an adult child who might have thrived had he only received more, "...praise, which autistic persons appreciate" (55). Sullivan would seriously have readers believe that if the narrator had only taken the time to condescend to say, "Bartleby, you are a terrific copyist!" the story would have ended quite differently. He claims that Bartleby's real tragedy is that he did not have "the structured environment and understanding personal supervisor he needed" (43). According to this interpretation, Bartleby has no personal agency whatsoever; he merely is a prop that reveals the cruelty of other people. The story as a whole is critical of those who fail to take a more active role in behaving with charity toward people who are unable to take care of themselves. Sullivan propagates both a rather shallow understanding of Melville's work and a conception of autism that denies the agency and adulthood of those with the condition.

A somewhat more nuanced interpretation of "Bartleby the Scrivener" that also assumes Bartleby to be pathological would pay less attention to condemning Bartleby as incompetent, and

focus more on the ways in which Bartleby's pathological presence contributes to the characterization of the narrator. When the reader assumes this stance, the story becomes one of how interaction with a pathological other affects the lives of typical people. H. Porter Abbott describes this kind of strategy as interpreting an unreadable character as a "catalyst" (452); that is, Bartleby's autistic presence can be seen as a catalyst that puts the narrator in a position conducive to revealing his own true nature. Indeed, the agenda of the narrator and the various changes he goes through as he desperately tries to explain Bartleby are a critical piece of the story. The assumption that Bartleby is pathological and in need of care leads to a much stronger indictment against the narrator, who, interestingly, seems to be using the narrative to defend himself against accusations of cruelty toward Bartleby. The main interpretive problem of the story becomes the trustworthiness of the narrator rather than the meaning of Bartleby's enigmatic words and actions. The lawyer's self congratulatory remarks at supposedly being able to get rid of Bartleby with, "no vulgar bullying, no bravado of any sort, no choleric hectoring, and striding to and fro across the apartment, jerking of vehement commands for Bartleby to bundle himself off with his beggarly traps" (27) seem more distasteful if one believes that he has merely found a strategy to slough off a helpless man in need without feeling guilty. All his moralizing about how he ought to care for poor Bartleby are not authentic, but simply another way for him to, "...cheaply purchase delicious self-approval," (15).

At the same time that a pathological interpretation of Bartleby questions the narrator's identity as a morally good man, it also stabilizes the narrator's identity as a professional, which would otherwise be questioned by Bartleby's resistance to his lifestyle. Bartleby is no longer qualified to be protesting capitalism; he is merely its passive victim. He has a sickness, not an alternative way of life.

However, the idea of using the attribution of pathology to completely dismiss the words and actions (or lack of words and actions) of Bartleby himself is absurd. “Bartleby the Scrivener” is pre-eminently about will and choice. To call Bartleby autistic in a pathological sense and dismiss his agency as a rational being is to ignore an extremely important part of the story. The few words that Bartleby uses are inherently tied up in the idea of agency. The repetition of the phrase, “I would prefer not to” as well what Abbott describes as the, “granitic resolve of its speaker’s attendant behavior” (455), draw attention to the importance of Bartleby’s chosen words and their function as an expression of agency. Again and again, Bartleby *prefers*. The word itself implies the awareness of a choice, and his decision to favor one thing over another. Bartleby does not concede his own incompetence by using another word, such as “cannot.” His use of “prefer” leads to the reader’s constant awareness that Bartleby is a conscious being capable of thought, even if readers may not be able to understand his thought. This awareness makes it impossible to dismiss Bartleby as sick and ignore him thereafter.

Beyond his use of “prefer,” Bartleby does and says several other things which prove that he is highly cognizant and able to reason and make decisions, and therefore not to be dismissed as mentally invalid for his autistic behaviors. When he first arrives at the law office, Bartleby is a diligent copyist, and does, “an extraordinary quantity of writing” (11). He proves himself capable of the work he is asked to do, only to later choose not to do it anymore. He also alludes to reasons for his recalcitrance in a way that indicates that they are logical and obvious to him, though he does not name them. When asked why he does not work anymore, Bartleby asks the lawyer, “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” (25). His confidence in the legitimacy of the cause for his own unorthodox decision is so solid that the lawyer temporarily decides Bartleby must be right, though the cause is still inaccessible to him, and allows Bartleby to remain idle.

Even when he is in the midst of his most seemingly pathological action, starving himself to death, Bartleby's uses his few words to assert his lucidity and awareness of the situation. He says to the lawyer, "I know you" (38) as if to shatter the pretence of charity the lawyer was attempting by visiting him in prison. When the lawyer tries to comfort Bartleby by telling him that the prison is actually not so bad he simply replies, "I know where I am" (38). Bartleby clearly does not suffer from any debilitating psychosis or mental incapacity. He is in perfectly in touch with reality and aware of his circumstances and choices.

The fact that some readers feel drawn to pathologize and dismiss Bartleby by calling him autistic, or giving him any other pathological label for that matter, may be the product of discomfort with the way in which the story questions the irreproachableness of normalcy. Perhaps the idea that someone in their right mind would view willful self-destruction as a favorable alternative to a typical lifestyle is a painful or even frightening insult to those who engage in that lifestyle. Indeed, within the story the lawyer seems to feel exactly this anxiety. Bartleby's presence as a person who, for the most part, does not engage in the either work or socialization destabilizes the lawyer's identity as a professional and a community member. When he is first bewildered by Bartleby's refusal to do work, the lawyer says, "It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith" (13). Bartleby shakes the foundation upon which the lawyer has led his life. It is a temporary relief for the lawyer when he is able to assign Bartleby an, "...excessive organic ill" (22). The lawyer comforts himself with the notion that the problem lies within Bartleby, not himself or the system with which he collaborates.

It is also possible that readers assign autism to Bartleby to assuage the pain of his tragedy by grasping at a specific cause for it. According to literary critic Morris Beja, ideas of

pathology, “pervert our response to the story and may even become aids in developing relatively painless ways of dealing with (that is dismissing) Bartleby’s painful case” (558). Perhaps when we think we know *why* something horrible happened, its occurrence becomes a matter of cold logic rather than an example of human suffering. In the more callous of minds, autism could even be distorted from an explanation of to a justification for Bartleby’s death; his fate was the natural elimination of non-functional person.

Nor does rejecting the notion of pathology and Bartleby’s humanity as a character in favor of elevating him to the status of a symbol seem appropriate. According to Stuart Murray in *Representing Autism*, the insistent corporeality of Bartleby causes him to resist being discussed as a symbol (*Representing*, 52). In one of his own moments of interpretive frustration, the narrator says of Bartleby, “...*he was always there*” (18). The fact that the single instance of more than one word in a row being italicized in the entire story is dedicated to emphasizing Bartleby’s physical presence suggests that this presence lies at the core of the mystery. Bartleby cannot be explained as a symbol while he sits nearby. It is only when Bartleby is dead, his physical presence removed, that the narrator can even begin to try to place his symbolic meaning. Yet the implausibility of his suggestion that Bartleby is a symbol for the misery and aloofness of all humanity indicates that even when he is gone, Bartleby cannot be divorced from his enigmatic presence. The “dead letter office” (41) anecdote placed at the end of the story is too distant from Bartleby the person. The narrator describes it as, “one little item of rumor, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener’s decease” (41). Somehow the distance between Bartleby himself and this attempted explanation of him makes it seem wholly inadequate.

The nature of Bartleby's autistic presence cries out for explanations, whether it be in terms of stereotypes or symbols. At the same time, his presence thwarts those explanations. The only solution to the mystery of Bartleby that does not require ignoring his presence or his will is to let go of the need to fully explain him and allow him to simply be inexplicable. In particular, the characteristics of autism in Bartleby prevent explanation of him because they preclude his own verbal representation of himself beyond the bare assertion of his will. As long as Bartleby enacts an autistic presence, he will both behave in an unusual manner and never explain his motives for his behavior in a way that his employer can understand. He goes about his existence uninterested in the social, and feels no need to represent himself to anyone, employer or reader.

This unusual behavior coupled with a failure to represent himself makes Bartleby "representation-hungry" (Abbott, 460) and inspires readers to follow the same pattern as the narrator, grasping at meanings that only half fit the story. The fact that all contrived representations of Bartleby are ultimately unsatisfactory reveals the necessity of allowing Bartleby to speak, or not speak, for himself.

Autism Narratives Then and Now

One hundred and fifty years passed between the publishing of the first edition of Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and that of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, yet the problem of reduction by means of labeling a character with a pathological conception of autism is a central one in both texts and their criticism. Melville approaches this problem from the point of view of a narrator who acts as an outsider to autism and desperately tries to find an explanation for a character who thwarts his endeavors to do so. Ultimately the narrator's or the reader's efforts to pin Bartleby down as sick do not ring true for

the character, but at the same time, no alternative explanation is given for him. He remains mysterious and inaccessible.

In a time of increasing, systematically gained knowledge of the specific characteristics of people with autism, Haddon experimented with crafting a fictitious version of autistic subjectivity. His book is truly unique in this aspect because other works of fiction before it which contained an autistic character were told from the point of view of friends and family members of that person, like Simon Armitage's 2002 novel *Little Green Man*. Haddon actually gave his autistic character a voice with which to represent himself and explain his peculiarities to the world. Rather than subtly implying the autistic character's agency, Haddon's character is able to articulately demand it for himself. Like "Bartleby the Scrivener," *The Curious Incident* also casts doubt on the interpretation of autistic behavior as exclusively pathological. However, it does so by integrating scientific knowledge about autism specific to its time into the narrative and yet privileging the authority of Christopher's words and actions over that knowledge in situations in which they conflict. We come away from the novel with the impression that although Christopher's thoughts and behaviors do have many connections to the scientific knowledge on autism, he is not limited in the ways that one might expect him to be from it.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

As a Discussion of Theories of Autism

Mark Haddon's 2003 novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, is the most widely read novel featuring an autistic character. Not only does the highly intelligent autistic teen, Christopher Boone, appear in the novel, but the story is told from his point of view. *The Curious Incident* alternates between chapters which advance the plot of the story, and those

which give more information about Christopher; mainly how he thinks and what he likes and dislikes. It begins with Christopher's decision to write a mystery about his quest to find out who murdered his neighbor's dog. In the course of his snooping, Christopher discovers that his father had lied about his mother's death. She had actually left them. Christopher runs away from home and joins his mother, but both of them quickly realize that their relationship is still very strained. At the end of the novel, Christopher's parents reach a delicate agreement to share custody of him.

In *The Curious Incident*, Haddon creates a picture of autism that is both highly recognizable to those with even tangential knowledge of the condition, and at the same time, questions its pathology. Christopher has all the well-documented stereotypical behaviors and deficits associated with "high-functioning autism" yet he is not entirely defined by them. He also has agency, talent, and the ability to enjoy life. He looks at things differently, but in some respects, he sees with more clarity than those around him. In this way, Haddon uses his character in order to defy negative, deterministic portrayals of autism in scientific literature, while still paying homage to the knowledge derived from them. However, his emphasis on Christopher's savant-like mathematical and spatial memory abilities could run the risk of limiting the ways in which autistic experience can be valued.

The unique stance of the novel on what was considered scientific certainty about autism in the early 2000's can best be seen by the way in which it discusses Theory of Mind. Theory of Mind is a concept in cognitive psychology that describes the ability to explain another person's actions in terms of thoughts, beliefs, or feelings that may be different than one's own. For example, thinking that a friend must be angry because he slammed a door is a use of Theory of Mind. Many cognitive and evolutionary psychologists believe that Theory of Mind is a crucial

skill that allows us to navigate the social world and thrive through relationships with other people (Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness*, 21).

The term Theory of Mind is perhaps well-known because of its association with the deficits seen in autism. In recent years, it has virtually become popular knowledge that the unusual behaviors of autistic people are caused by an impairment in Theory of Mind. At the root of the manifest symptoms of autism is a frustration at not being to understand other people. Autism expert Simon Baron-Cohen was at the forefront of this explanation, coining the term “mindblindness” to describe the apparent inability of autistic people to have knowledge of the mental states of others (*Mindblindness*, 60).

In the beginning of the novel, Haddon goes far out of his way to show the reader that Christopher has difficulty with Theory of Mind. On the fifth page, we learn that Christopher has chosen to write about his own adventure rather than making up someone else’s because, “...it happened to me and I find it hard to imagine things which did not happen to me” (Haddon, 5). He later goes on to describe his reaction to a specific test, called the Appearance-Reality Task, used by psychologists to determine whether or not a child has Theory of Mind. Christopher explains the test as it was administered by his teacher, Julie:

One day Julie sat down at a desk next to me and put a tube of Smarties on the desk, and she said, “Christopher, what do you think is in here?”

And I said, “Smarties.”

Then she took the top off the Smarties tube and turned it upside down and a little red pencil came out and she laughed and I said, “It’s not Smarties, it’s a pencil.”

Then she put the little red pencil back inside the Smarties tube and put the top back on.

Then she said, “If your mummy came in now and we asked her what was inside the Smarties tube, what do you think she would say?” because I used to call Mother *Mummy* then, not *Mother*.

And I said, “A pencil,”

That was because when I was little I didn’t understand about other people having minds. And Julie said to Mother and Father that I would always find this very difficult.

(116)

Here, Haddon not only gives a convincing demonstration of Christopher’s mindblindness, but he also uses the exact details of the study for which this test was first developed. In Gopnik and Astington’s 1988 article, “Children’s Understanding of Representational Change and Its Relation to the Understanding of False Belief and the Appearance-Reality Distinction,” the researchers conducted an experiment using a Smarties tube which actually contained pencils to evaluate the abilities of typical children in understanding the knowledge of others as different from their own. They found that children usually perform the task correctly (responding that a naive person will believe Smarties are in the tube) by the time they are four or five years old. The experiment was repeated with children with autism spectrum disorders in many contexts to support Baron-Cohen’s notion of autistic mindblindness. For this reason, Gopnik and Astington’s article has been cited in hundreds of scientific works on autism.

Of course, the Smarties tube and the pencils in particular are not really important. Any combination an object and a container that the object does not belong in would have served the

purpose of the demonstration. A crayon box with a raisin inside would have worked equally well. Why, then, does Haddon choose to write about an exact imitation of the experiment that laid the groundwork for what has become conventional wisdom about autism? Perhaps it is because he must engage with readers who endorse this wisdom before he can cast doubt upon it. The Smarties tube and pencils are a cue to the reader that Haddon is familiar with the scientific literature and respects it as at least one form of knowledge about autism. He uses the seemingly irreproachable truths of autism, like mindblindness, to create what would appear to be a realistic and respectful portrayal of autism to those who endorse those truths. Through his character, he creates an autism that is recognizable before he tweaks with the details of Christopher's supposed impairments.

Indeed, one of the most reviewer-celebrated aspects of the book was the ways in which it overtly illustrates the psychologist's understanding of autism through the experiences of someone who has the condition. Christopher's unusual articulacy puts him in the unique position of personally confirming everything we believe we know about autism. For once, we are not frustrated by the fact that autism is a state that often forbids the popular method of learning about human difference through self-report. Jay McInerney of the *New York Times* applauded the fact that, "Christopher tells us all we need to know about his condition." Simon Baron-Cohen, himself, inventor of the term "mindblindness," raved, "Mark Haddon has a rare gift of imagining and communicating what it must be like to have Asperger syndrome, and from my experience of having met many people with this condition, I would also say that he is remarkably accurate in his portrait" (*Review*, 450). Critics and psychologists alike adored the fact that Haddon weaved scientific knowledge into a story from the perspective of an autistic

teen. For some parts of the novel, Christopher was a comforting voice, telling researchers and everyone who agreed with them, “Yes, you were right. Autism is exactly as you suspected.”

But for the careful reader, the reassurance does not really last. Within the mystery plot going on in the novel, Christopher blatantly uses Theory of Mind skills to deceive his father, who does not appreciate his snooping. After his father takes away the story he was writing, Christopher searches the house to get it back. Like any neurotypical person searching for an item someone has hidden, Christopher makes all kinds of conjectures about what thoughts may have determined where his father hid it. He says, “I didn’t do any detecting in my own room because I reasoned that Father wouldn’t hide something from me in my own room unless he was being very clever and doing what is called a *Double Bluff*” (92). Here he recognizes not only that his father has thoughts, but that his father thinks differently than himself. Unlike Christopher, who has acquired ideas from reading Sherlock Holmes stories, his father would probably not be so tricky as to hide something from him under his nose.

Haddon’s repetition of these kinds of inferences only serves to reinforce the idea that his endowing Christopher with Theory of Mind is not a mistake of inconsistency he inadvertently made while wrapped up in the excitement of writing a mystery. When Christopher finds the story he was looking for, he decides that it is alright to leave it where he found it because, “I reasoned that Father wasn’t going to throw it away if he had put it in the shirt box” (94). Here Christopher both makes a reasonable inference about his father’s intentions and anticipates that his father will react with anger if he finds the story absent from the place he hid it. In order to cover up the fact that he also found the letters from his mother that his father had hidden from him, Christopher says, “I folded the letter and hid it under my mattress in case Father found it and got cross” (99). Christopher is not blind when it comes to predicting the behavior of others.

He is perfectly capable of making reasonable assumptions about their intentions and feelings, albeit in perhaps a somewhat more awkward and less automatic way. It is not really the case that, as Lisa Zunshine claims in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, "...we, the readers, supply those missing mental states, thus making sense of the story" (12).

Christopher makes sense of his own story.

These attributions of thoughts, beliefs, and feelings to others are exactly what experts like Alison Gopnik and Simon Baron-Cohen would describe as extremely difficult, if not impossible for people, like Christopher, who have autism. For them, a deficit in Theory of Mind is a root of autistic behavior, and it causes tremendous suffering for those who have the condition. Gopnik's exercise in what it might be like to have mindblindness reads like a nightmare inspired by the works of Salvador Dali:

This is what it's like to sit round the dinner table....Around me bags of skin are draped over chairs, and stuffed into pieces of cloth, they shift and protrude in unexpected ways...Two dark spots near the top of them swivel restlessly back and forth. A hole beneath the spots fills with food and from it comes a stream of noises. Imagine that the noisy skin-bags suddenly moved toward you, and their noises grew loud, and you have no idea why, no way of explaining them or predicting what they would do next.

(Unpublished, 1993)

The description on the back of one of Baron-Cohen's later books on autistic mindblindness, describes autism as the, "...most severe childhood psychological disorder," blatantly linking deficits in the Theory of Mind with the supposed horror of autism (*Understanding*, 2000).

But Christopher is not really the tortured, sick child that one would expect him to be from these portrayals of autism. His first-hand narrative as a person with autism questions the truth, or

at least completeness, of the Theory of Mind deficit hypothesis for autism. It is interesting to note that his description of himself as having difficulty with Theory of Mind is rooted in an experience that was constructed by scientific authorities. For the Appearance-Reality Task, Christopher was placed in a situation where he was expected to have difficulty, and then told that that difficulty would be a permanent part of his life. When he is actively explaining himself to the reader, he draws upon this experience in which someone else told him what his limits were. However, when the reader is more casually learning about Christopher through his thoughts and actions in everyday-life, it quickly becomes apparent that he is not mindblind at all. Perhaps this disparity between what Christopher believes about himself and what he actually capable of could be read as a warning about accepting deterministic views of disorders given by scientific authorities too quickly.

It is possible that the notion of mindblindness itself invites outside interpretations that impose limits on people with autism. Christopher's use of Theory of Mind is not just a way of questioning any theory of autism, but one that could be particularly threatening to the self-determination of those with autism. According to literary critic Stuart Murray:

ToM [Theory of Mind] ideas, it can be argued, to some degree validate and legitimize any external reading of the autistic condition. If we describe an individual as having an incapacity to read the thoughts, emotions, and actions of others, then we potentially go some way to creating an idea of that individual, not as an agent, but as a figure who functions in terms that are supplied to him or her. If the individual with autism is posited as a "non-reader," then the responsibility for understanding or interpreting his or her actions comes from without. ("Autism," 3)

The notion that autistic people lack Theory of Mind, then, opens up the door for people like Julie to interpret Christopher's behavior for him and make judgments about what he can and cannot do.

Haddon's novel may be useful in restoring agency to those with autism by being, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder termed it, "productively parasitic" (1) upon this potentially damaging theory of autistic behavior. According to Mitchell and Snyder, the disability narrative has the role of complicating or even denying deterministic conceptions of disabilities in other disciplines. In this way, disability narratives offer an alternative manner of "truth-telling" and have the potential to create opportunities for those with disabilities to determine their own identities. Literary critic Vivienne Muller said of *The Curious Incident*, "Reading the novel as the representation of the Asperger's individual as speaking subject, the text is seen as a positive articulation of disability as ability, where we are invited to appreciate difference not as deviation to be standardized, but rather unique, even enriching aspects of individuals that might be accepted" (121).

The Curious Incident also uses the Weak Central Coherence or Impaired Global Processing hypothesis of autism, only to later cast doubt upon its legitimacy. The Weak Central Coherence Theory posits that autistic behavior is caused by the way in which people with autism are extremely detail oriented, but have great difficulty understanding the whole of a concept (Boucher, 190). In effect, autistic people are seeing the trees with clarity that neurotypical people can only dream of, but they have no notion of the forest. Proponents of this theory frequently cite studies which have demonstrated a combination of superior memory for detail and deficits in higher level comprehension in autistic individuals (Boucher 194).

In some places, Christopher seems to exemplify Weak Central Coherence. He explains the experience of this to his readers:

I see everything...I remember standing in a field on Wednesday, 15 June 1994 because Father and Mother and I were driving to Dover...and I had to stop to go for a wee, and I went into a field with cows in it and after I'd had a wee I stopped and looked at the field and I noticed these things:

1. There are 19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white
2. There is a village in the distance which has 31 visible houses and a church and square tower and not a spire (140-141)

Christopher goes on to talk about 35 other things he saw and even draws a picture of exactly what one of the cows he saw looked like. Then, he says that this causes problems because he must pause and take a break before, "...I can remember what I am doing and where I am meant to be going" (144). Somewhere in the midst of examining every minute detail of the field, Christopher has forgotten that he is that his is supposed to get back in the car and leave. His fixation on detail and loss of global relevance of situations go hand in hand.

Yet at other moments, Christopher makes broad statements of relevance following a list of details that seem to suggest that he has central coherence. After explaining a counter-intuitive solution to a math problem, Christopher makes the perfectly reasonable generalization, "And this shows that intuition can sometimes get things wrong" (65). In the very last paragraph of the story, he chooses to use the adventures of the previous pages as a way of empowering himself. He talks about becoming a scientist one day, and says, "I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found

my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything” (221). Though he does seem to have an unusually high level of interest in details and reiterating them, Christopher is also capable of assigning broader significance those details.

Haddon’s use of another psychological theory of autism, that of Weak Central Coherence, could be another part of his efforts at creating a recognizable autism for the general public. The idea of people with autism being detail-oriented without comprehension of larger meaning probably gained a lot of its popularity from books and films like *Rain Man*, which featured autistic characters with genius skills in one small area, but severe disabilities in matters of daily functioning. By using this stereotypical image of autism in at least some areas, Haddon is able to connect to an audience who endorses those beliefs.

At the same time, his deliberate efforts to instill doubt that that the Weak Central Coherence theory is entirely accurate destabilize deterministic notions of autism. Christopher’s defiance of the Weak Central Coherence theory brings to the reader’s attention that his experiences are not defined or limited by the concepts that we use to explain part of his behavior. He exists independently of our notions about the label assigned to him. Perhaps the Weak Central Coherence Theory has the same potential as Theory of Mind to encourage people to speak for those with autism and ignore their agency. If we view people with autism as incapable of putting details together to create meaning, we can then step in and take charge of this integration of parts on their behalf. Haddon’s novel discourages the usurpation of autistic agency by doubting the truth of the Weak Central Coherence Theory and attempting to give a voice to a fictitious person with autism.

It’s interesting to note that Haddon is not the first to support the superior detail processing part of the Weak Central Coherence Theory of autism, but doubt the global

processing deficit part. A competing theory, called the Enhanced Perceptual Function hypothesis, was set forth by Mottron and Burack in 2001 (43). This theory allows for autistic people to be capable of global processing in addition to having significantly better local processing. Neurotypical people lose consciousness of local information as they switch from local to global processing, but autistic people are able to retain it. Proponents of the theory often cite inconsistent findings from studies of visual processing that focused on the ability of autistic people to discern a global structures in an image (Frith and Dakin, 2005).

The Curious Incident also questions scientific interpretations of autism through its subtle allusions to older theories of condition that have been debunked. The obvious inappropriateness of applying psychoanalytic theories of autism to Christopher draws attention to the fact that today's wisdom may be tomorrow's folly. The things we think we know about Christopher and people like him may not stand on ground as solid as we would like to believe.

One of these psychoanalytic theories of autism, set forth by *Bruno Bettelheim* in *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, is that autism is caused by the rejection of the child by his mother. The autistic child reacts to this rejection with horrible anxiety at his traumatic exposure to the idea, "that each of us is alone in the world and must fend for himself" (Bettelheim, 14). According to Bettelheim, autistic children then develop a strong desire order and sameness because, "its [actions to maintain sameness in the environment] purpose is to lessen anxiety" (71). Autistic children need order and sameness in the physical world to make up for their painful awareness of the inconstancy of their mothers. Leo Kanner had a similar idea that autistic children, "find security in sameness" (Kanner, 1951).

In *The Curious Incident*, there is a moment where one of Christopher's teachers tries to apply this belief about anxiety and the desire for order and sameness to him, but he decidedly rejects it.

Mr. Jeavons said that I like maths because it was safe. He said I like maths because it meant solving problems, and these problems were difficult and interesting but there was always a straightforward answer at the end. And what he meant was that maths wasn't like life because in life there are no straightforward answers in the end.

This is because Mr. Jeavons doesn't understand numbers. (61-62)

Christopher goes on to describe The Monty Hall Problem, a math puzzle that he is particularly excited about because it defies the order that people typically expect when it comes to probabilities. Mr. Jeavons both misconstrued Christopher's reason for loving math and underestimated his appreciation of its intricacies. For Christopher, math is not merely a way of coping with the lack of order in his personal life. Indeed, he rejoices in the appearance of the unexpected in math.

Haddon's depiction of Christopher's relationship with his mother in *The Curious Incident* brings to mind Bettelheim's suggestion of the "refrigerator mother" who causes autism in her children by treating them coldly, but ultimately disconfirms it. The fact that Christopher's mother left her family implies that she could be the cruel type of mother warned about in Bettelheim's writings, but her representation of herself in her letters paints a different picture. According to her letters, Christopher's strained relationship with his mother is the result of the interaction between his difficult behaviors and her lack of patience. She abandoned him because she was unable to cope with his behavior, not because she rejected or hated him from birth. In the letter where she explains her reasons for leaving, she says,

And then you and me had that argument. Do you remember? I'd cooked you something and you wouldn't eat it. And you hadn't eaten for days and days and you were looking so thin. And you started to shout and I got cross and I threw the food across the room. Which I know I shouldn't have done. And you grabbed the chopping board and you threw that and it hit my foot and broke my toes... And I couldn't walk properly for a month, do you remember, and your father had to look after you.

And I remember looking at the two of you and seeing you together and thinking how you were really different with him. Much calmer. And it made me so sad because it was like you didn't really need me at all. And I think that's when I realized that you and your father were probably better off if I wasn't living in the house. (109)

Here, Haddon points out that the families of autistic people often have extremely frustrating experiences. Bettelheim's analysis failed to account for the mother's perspective, and how her child's behavior affects her closeness to him. This reminder that other theories about the nature of autism have come and gone suggests to the reader that the "truths" we apply to autistic people today may not last forever.

Autism and Representing the Self

Haddon's efforts to instill doubt about the ability of negative, deterministic scientific theories to explain autism open up a space in which Christopher's autism can be valued. Because these theories are questionable, Christopher has potential to be more than the combination of deficits associated with his condition. He also is not precluded from the opportunity to represent himself to others. The theories have not already spoken for him. Like the autistic autobiography writers Temple Grandin, Donna Williams, and Daniel Tammet,

Christopher can communicate the intricacies of his perspective on the world and defend the legitimacy of that perspective.

Like the autistic proponents of neurodiversity, Christopher finds self-representation to be a matter of personal importance. He discusses this idea in the context of explaining why he dislikes metaphors:

I think it [a metaphor] should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards...My name is a metaphor. It means *carrying Christ* and it comes from the Greek words *χριστός* (which means *Jesus Christ*) and *φέρειν* and it was the name given to St Christopher because he carried Jesus Christ across a river.

Mother used to say that it meant Christopher was a nice name because it was a story about being kind and helpful, but I do not want my name to mean a story about being kind and helpful. I want my name to mean me. (15-16)

Although this passage could be construed as a demonstration of the fact that Christopher uses language in a very literal way, which is frequently cited as a “symptom” of autism (DSM IV), his particular emphasis on disliking metaphors applied to himself suggests indicates they are somehow personally offensive. When he says, “I want my name to mean me,” Christopher asserts that *he* should be source of information about himself, not an apocryphal story or a psychology textbook. Douglas Biklin, editor of *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, a compilation of writings of people with autism, expresses a similar thought in his introduction. According to Biklin, “The contributing authors establish their own authority to be read and appreciated” (17). The autistic writers are worth attention as individuals and should be understood on their own terms.

Christopher also reveals his preference to represent himself through the incidents in which he points out when others were wrong about him. He uses his story as an opportunity to correct the misinterpretations of himself. Mr. Jeavons' suggestion that math makes him feel safe would be one example of this. Perhaps frustration with experiences in which authorities figures like Mr. Jeavons tried to put words in his mouth is one of the reasons Christopher finds writing his own story so appealing. Christopher also talks about the children who shout derogatory things at the "special needs" school bus he rides, then immediately follows with, "I am going to prove that I'm not stupid" (44). He hopes to use his autobiographical narrative to fight back against their misconceptions about him.

When addressing the fact that he is occasionally overwhelmed by details and must take breaks, a problem that is frequently exasperating to his parents, Christopher nonetheless defends the way his mind works. He even casts the neurotypical way of thinking as inferior to his by saying, "...most people are almost blind and they don't see most things and there is lots of spare capacity in their heads and it is filled with things which aren't connected and are silly" (144). Here, Christopher goes so far as to stage a reversal, in which his readers are told they are the disabled ones, blind to details that he can appreciate. He casts himself as normal and others as deviant. The act of narrating his story enables Christopher to "destabilize the disability/ability binary that often privileges the latter term" (Muller 121), for his readers.

For Christopher and for others with autism, the exercise of writing itself can be a venue for expressing beliefs in neurodiversity. Writing is an opportunity for empowerment or to set forth an interpretation of their condition as a form of alterity. The final words of Christopher's narrative are, "I wrote a book and I can do anything" (221). He understands his ability to write as evidence that his potential is limitless. Temple Grandin expresses a similar idea in the final

thoughts in her autobiography by saying, “When Isaac Asimov died, his obituary contained the statement that death was not much of an issue because all his thoughts would live on in books. ... Maybe immortality is the effect one’s thoughts and actions can have on other people” (199). Grandin’s suggestion that writing is a way of attaining immortality must be understood as a self-conscious reference to her own autobiography, which was one of the first by an autistic writer.

The Problems of Savantism

Although Christopher’s strong drive for self-representation in *The Curious Incident* is a positive and liberating way for him to consciously get outside the assumptions of his diagnosis, the display of his extraordinary skills may not be. These skills exhibited by Christopher in mathematics and spatial processing amount to the concept of savantism. People with savantism, sometimes called savants, have an unusual stroke of genius in addition to a serious cognitive disability. Savantism is a popular fascination, not a technical term or a diagnosis. Researchers estimate that less than 10% of people with autism have extraordinary skills (Heaton, 902). While it could contribute to the undermining of the association between pathology and autism, the inclusion of savantism in the autism narrative runs the risk of inviting voyeurism or reducing the value of autism to the extent to which a person with autism is a savant.

Stuart Murray suggests that savantism is the visual manifestation we associate with autism, a disability that would otherwise be difficult to detect from gaze (“Autism, 5). He compares the reader’s gaze at the autistic savant to that which Rosemarie Garland-Thompson describes as spectator’s gaze at nineteenth and twentieth century freak shows. We derive a voyeuristic pleasure from savants that may not get us any closer to understanding them as fully human. Their genius only intensifies the extent to which we consider them an “other.”

The way in which demonstrations of Christopher's mathematical and spatial skills involve the use of symbols, graphics, and drawings in addition to words is highly evocative of this idea of savantism as the visual manifestation of autism. The repetition of complex maps in the books, drawn by Christopher from memory, on pages 35, 87, 140, 144, 189, and 197 is far beyond what is necessary to be informative about the character. The readers get it: Christopher has a great spatial memory. After the first few maps, they begin to transform from readers into freak show spectators, gawking at Christopher's oddness and emotionally distancing themselves from him.

Further, the emphasis on Christopher's savantism encourages interpretations in which his skills redeem his disability, or make his condition useful. Although this may seem like a positive way of understanding autism, it could actually be very limiting to people with autism because it allows those who do not have the condition to determine the ways in which autistic experience can be valued. If autism is valued because of the presence of savantism in the autistic person, then that person is only valuable to the extent to which they have savant-like skills. They are left without the ability to determine what is valuable about themselves. Worse, if they are among the majority of people with autism, who are not savants, they have no value at all.

Christopher himself may endorse this idea to an extent. Referring to his non-savant classmates at his special education school, he says, "All the other children at my school are stupid," (43) and goes on to pay them very little attention in the narrative. Without skills like those he has, they are not worth his time. At the same time, some of the things he values in himself, like being brave enough to survive a train station at rush hour, are not savant skills. Perhaps Christopher's pride in accomplishments like this, which would hardly be impressive for a typical person, keep our tendency to value him for his savant skills in check. The autistic

person's self concept is not necessarily dependent on what society deems to be their personal assets.

Conclusion

In this work, I have discussed the problems and possibilities of representations of autism in literature. The fact that the type of autism portrayed in literature is largely limited to “high functioning” autism with savant skills is problematic because it neglects the heterogeneity of the condition. The potentially beneficial influence that literature has in its portrayals of “high functioning” autism by opening up the possibility of valuing the condition as cognitive difference rather than disability is denied to the more severe forms of the condition. The specific emphasis on savantism in literature runs the danger of encouraging the valuing of only specific attributes of the autistic person that the neurotypical deem valuable.

Criticism which imposes a pathological understanding of autism on a character that did not have the label within the text can encourage a reductionist understanding of the character. Reducing the behavior of characters like Bartleby to the mere manifestation of a mental disorder robs us the ability to appreciate the true complexity of the text. Associating a non-pathological understanding of autism with Bartleby may allow us to accept his strangeness without dismissing him.

The way in which modern literary portrayals of autism question negative, deterministic, scientific ones creates an alternative understanding of the condition for both those who experience it and those who do not. Haddon's representation of autism through Christopher destabilizes our understanding of autism as profound disability by allowing Christopher to act outside of his supposed impairments and creating a space in which we can value his condition.

Autism need not be understood exclusively in the way that is cast in science. There are other, more humanist ways of viewing cognitive difference.

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