Abstract:

Ever since ‘The Rainman’, the notion of the ‘autistic savant’ has gripped the popular imagination. The savant makes appearances in both fiction and documentary, and Pat Howlin has estimated that some 10% of autistic people possess the trait.

I approach this phenomenon from the sociological perspective as a constructed role which fulfils a certain desire or need in the popular imagination and attempt to locate the role in historical archetypes.

In so doing I ask questions as to what is a savant? Who is in or out? When did the association of idiot leave the picture and why?

Why for example, are the skills of classical organist Louis Vierne, who started to play the piano by ear at age two, and his friend Marcel Dupre, who could perform the entire organ works of Bach from memory, not included in the canon? Is this because they do not have the additional component of low IQ that has traditionally been included in the popular definition or because they have otherwise not fulfilled the social role and inducement of wonder that the examples to be found in the pages of Treffert and Sachs have?. Is it necessary for the savant to be an outsider, to play the role of an exotic other, distanced from the nuanced gaze of the casual observer and how is this trope exploited to the potential disadvantage of that class of people reputed to possess these traits in some measure?

These are issues I shall attempt to address in this paper which will take a critical stance against the medical freakery of current studies and in so doing, examine just what the construction of the savant means to the ordinary autistic individual.
The Social Construction of the Savant.

By Laurence Arnold

Introduction:

“Wit, an’t be thy will, put me into good fooling!
Those wits, that think they have thee, do very oft
prove fools; and I, that am sure I lack thee, may
pass for a wise man: for what says Quinapalus?
‘Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit.”

(Shakespeare, n.d.)

There is something about the savant that seems to inspire or capture the popular imagination; some sense of wonder at the performance of extraordinary feats, one’s sense of reality being challenged by things that one could neither replicate oneself or sufficiently explain. It is rather like one’s childlike wonder at a magician’s show, thrilling to the prestidigitation and illusion, suspending one’s disbelief in the face of what appears to be magic. Evidence of this popular fascination can be found in that great repository of folk legend, the movie catalogue of Hollywood, with the Rainman (The Rainman, 1988) Here the entertainment value of the movie is predicated upon the extraordinary feats that Raymond is capable of and his naivety in the complex social milieux and situations that his brother’s scheming involve him in. Notwithstanding the relationship between Raymond and Charlie, without the savant skills, there would be no plot and his autism and rare skills are presented in such a way as to promote amazement. Raymond performs a number of the stunts one expects of the illusionist - the prediction of the waitress’ telephone number, the sequence of cards, the day on which a person was born. We know too, if we examine this as a text without the suspension of disbelief necessary for the enjoyment of the illusion, that what we are witnessing is an illusion of the cinema. The script has all the answers already. We are witnessing a variation of magical realism or the presentation of the supernatural in the movies in the sense that we believe through the action, what we are seeing.

However, we might be staggered to learn that the character’s extraordinary skills are based upon skills that are known to exist, possessed not so much by the professional charlatan, but by at least one individual who can, without artifice, reproduce those feats of memory and concentration.

Whilst the individual who inspired the characterisation, the late Kim Peek, (Wisconsin Medical Society, 2009) was not autistic, the creation of Raymond as a character who, in addition to having savant skills, is autistic. This has given a boost to the popular notion of a peculiar connection between autism and these traits, not only in fiction, but also in the development of theories about autism.

At this point it would be wise to leave aside the further representation of those traits in fiction, as something more germane to the writings of Stuart Murray (Murray, 2008), to look at some rather more basic notions of what it is that is being represented, why autism seems to be in the mix, and just what it does represent to the real life category of people who are designated autistic who do not reproduce prodigious feats of calculation at the drop of a matchbox.

Definitions:

Just as every scientist needs a clear set of definitions before advancing any axioms based upon them, I need to be clear about what the phenomenon we are witnessing or seeing represented actually is.

Whilst it may be that the passenger on the proverbial Clapham Omnibus would know a savant if one got on the bus next to them, can we really be sure that everyone is talking about the same thing? It can be asserted that we cannot for the definition seems malleable, and this is where the notion of social construction is be introduced, construction of who is in, and who is out, based around the role that
particular archetype serves in the context in which it is being presented. There is the added complexity of the life lived by an individual with those traits against the simplifications and misrepresentations of the medical case study, or fictional representation.

In its original usage, the term was “Idiot Savant” and even World Expert Darrold Treffert (Treffert, 1989) used this version as the subtitle to the first edition of his book: “extraordinary people”. The words are well established:

The derivation of is plain: a combination of idiot, “a category of persons of low or the lowest intelligence” (Idiots Act, 1886) which category continues into the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act (Mental Deficiency Act, 1913) forming the bottom of a hierarchy as persons with mental defectiveness of such a degree that they were unable to care for themselves.

Savant, on the other hand, is defined in the Collins French Dictionary as: “Savant, adjective - learned scholarly, skilful performing. noun - scholar scientist” (Rudler & Anderson, 1952), in essence a category that older readers may recall as a coterie of post Enlightenment intellectuals haunting the salons of Paris, in which Voltaire, Roussaeu and Diderot would be of the party.

Thus the juxtaposition of Idiot and Savant would suggest a paradox and a contradiction.

Indeed some of the earliest descriptions we have - exemplified again by Treffert are to be found in the writings of John Langdon Down (Down, 1887). Down working in the 19th century during the period between the Lunacy and Idiocy Acts established for the first time new categories of mentally defective people, differentiating for the first time the possible aetiologies of 'lunacy' and 'idiocy'. Lecturing upon the cases he found during his work in the Earlswood Hospital, he describes appears to be the classical description of people of otherwise low intelligence and self care skills who nonetheless, possess 'Islands of Genius'. Skills which are not only out of kilter with the general perception of the individual in question but outstanding even to the skilled professor in that subject. This is the type of individual who perhaps the Rainman would exemplify. (Treffert being an advisor on the movie)

In the intervening years, between the 1989 and 2006 editions of his book, the word “idiot” expediently disappeared from the title. One might speculate as to why.
Treffert despite the common identification in popular fiction of autism and savant skill considers the incidence amongst autistic people at around 1: in 10, higher than for any non-autistic group, but far from universal. Beate Hermelin in Bright Splinters of the Mind, a book some autistic readers have considered patronising due to its “othering” gaze, that is to say the psychologists equivalent of ‘orientalism’ (Said, 1977) cites the incidence as even rarer.

Hermelin’s reasoning is not particular convincing however, the scholarship appears too speculative, too anecdotal.

Howlin (Howlin, et al., 2009) on the other hand has described the percentage of savants as being anything up to a third of the autistic population, a figure which is questionable, particularly by Treffert’s estimations.

It can be supposed however that all the figures are accurate, but that the authors have something different in mind when they speak of the savant. Howlin’s description may come close to the “spiky profile” (Happé, 1994) something well known to the present author who simultaneously managed the achievement of scoring in the highest percentiles on some tests and below the cut-off for meaningful definition on others, in the full scale intelligence test. (Wechsler, 1997) rather than Treffert’s prodigious savants

Treffert had this much to say in a personal (All Wales Autism Resource (AWARES), 2005) exchange, addressing the question of “splinter skills” (a watered down notion of the idiot/savant paradox, taking account of the mixed profiles of IQ subtests where an individual scores high on one and low on another)

“I don’t particularly like the term ‘splinter skills’ either but unfortunately it seems already entrenched in the literature. I agree ‘innate skills’ would be an improvement. I also agree with your observations that savant skills are not tied to IQ, and should not be defined in terms of IQ testing only. Your description of being able ‘to perform some skill without being aware how one does it and without having consciously learned it’ is very apt and accurate.”

So is the designation of “idiot” necessary at all, in order to define the severe dissonance between a low recorded IQ and feats of extraordinary skill.

Certainly the regiment of individuals possessing extraordinary calculating skills commensurate with the most celebrated of classically recorded “idiot savants” would include Jerry Newport, who certainly is not a man of limited intelligence. (Newport, et al., 1970) He is not alone, history is replete with examples Ramanujan (Hardy, 1978) being perhaps the most famous. However in the realm of extraordinary memory, without even mentioning Luria’s Shereshevsky, (Luria, 1987) a recent biography cites Oscar Wilde (Wright, 2009) Wilde, from anecdotal reference, certainly could have rivalled Kim Peek in the reproduction of eidetically recorded text. He apparently had the same abilities to read whole texts in matters of minutes with near perfect recall. An anecdote is told of how a colleague once instanced a quotation from the works of Walter Pater but was unable to recollect the work in question:

“It is in appreciation, in the essay on ‘Style’, p. 7 - left-hand side, - at the bottom.”

Wilde is reputed to have replied:

In these latter days one would score a point for even being acqainted with Walter Pater, let alone being fluent in his works.

C S Lewis likewise, is reputed to have had the same skill. According to a former student Lewis would play a game with Kenneth Tynan, as he recalls:

“Tynan had to choose a number from one to forty, for the shelf in Lewis’s library; a number from one to twenty, for the place in this shelf; from one to a hundred, for the page; and from one to twenty-five for the line, which he read aloud. Lewis had then to identify the book and say what the page was about. I can believe this, having seen how rapidly he found passages in his complete Rudyard Kipling or his William Morris.” (Fowler, 2003)
It seems therefore that the definition of “idiot savant” is slipping from our grasp already. Even the authors brother by his own account has read more than 4000 volumes as an avid book collector, with a keen memory for what he has read, though not perhaps as keen as Wilde or Lewis.

Prodigy is perhaps another term one meets in the accounts of the “Savant” phenomenon. In this case it is not necessarily the disparity of intelligence so much as the relative youth of the individual that gives rise to an othering gaze.

One does not even have to cite Mozart in finding musical exemplars in the mainstream tradition of classical music who could presumably parallel the achievements of Derek Paravince’s or Treffert’s exemplars of Leslie Lemke and Blind Tom.

Why for instance are Organist Loius Vierne, who started to play the piano by ear at age two, and (Smith, 1999) his friend Marcel Dupré, (Sabatier, n.d.) who could perform the entire organ works of Bach from memory, not included in the canon of musical savants? Is this because they do not have the additional component of low IQ that has traditionally been included in the popular definition or because they have otherwise not fulfilled the social role and inducement of wonder that the examples to be found in the pages of Treffert and Oliver Sacks have? Is it necessary for the savant to be an outsider, to play the role of an exotic other, distanced from the nuanced gaze of the casual observer and how is this trope exploited to the potential disadvantage of that class of people reputed to possess these traits in some measure?

In art whilst not being aware of an exact parallel to Stephen Wiltshire, one nonetheless finds the “prodigy” Michelango, and Leonardo. These two classical examples apart, one can find in the pre Raphaelite Millais (Fleming, 1998) an example of the “typical” prodigy, who entered the royal academy at the age of 11. His skills in producing lifelike drawings from memory are remarkable, however they fit within the context of academic art rather too neatly never mind the other cultural expectations of the wild pre-Raphaelites that he is sufficiently othered not to need the pseudo scientific amazement of a Treffert or Howlin.

Returning to Wiltshire, there is little doubt that he is both a remarkable artist and an individual of prodigious memory. However he is not unique in that respect of being considered an autistic savant with a fascination for architecture. Gilles Trehin, with his lifelong accomplishment of drawing and populating the imaginary city of Urville (Trehin, 2006) For the architectural student however, something might be familiar here, for the drawings somewhat resemble those of visionary architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret known to the world as Le Corbusier (Corbusier, 1973) one can also find exemplary vision in Ivor de Wofle’s imagined city, situated on the reclaimed dereliction of a Nuneaton stone quarry. (de Wofle, 1971) Such flights of fantasy are by no means unique amongst practicing architects and it an oft told anecdote that the profession of architect is one which favours another form of ‘neurodiversity’ from autism, that is to say dyslexia, which is also considered to bring positive attributes of greater spatial awareness. Not dissimilar to the autistic advantage that Temple Grandin is considered to have, when designing abattoirs. (Sacks, 1995)

So what is it all about? Perhaps the pursuit of the neurological explanation for the phenomena of extraordinary skills, is like the pursuit of the Unicorn. One knows what it is, one can describe and instance it, but does it really exist, or is it merely a creation borne out of other necessities, inclusive of real features (horn and hooves) but somewhat fictively assembled together.

Perhaps the notion of the savant has little to do with the individuals concerned, but more with those who have immortalised them in text and the popular media. Perhaps something is to be gained by looking at the phenomenon with different eyes, taking perhaps, as the introductory quote from Shakespeare suggests, a look at the pre modern notion of the wise fool.

Essentially the mediaeval notion was of the wise fool, but within that tradition there were varieties of kept fool, including the ‘natural’ Robert Armin (Mc Donagh, 2008), Shakespeares Feste, had to work hard at playing the fool, but he was a man of some learning producing an early history of folly (Armin, 1609), essential reading for any student of the role of “learning disability” (Digby, Ann; Wright, David, 2002)
for there are to be found in Armin’s accounts and his sources, not only the professional clown, but people who would today be categorised as ‘intellectually impaired’

In every case they were there for the entertainment of the wealthy and privileged, licenced to possess those traits of directness, simplicity and plain speaking often attributed to the autistic individual these days.

One can already see the notion of a social role here, the fools licence, the motley that allows one to have an alternate gaze at oneself through the fools eyes. One can look at the categories of professional fool too, the category to which Armin belonged. One can look for instance at the antics of his contemporary and rival, serial Morris Dancer. Will Kemp (Wiles, 2005). Kemp was the origin of the term “nine days wonder” a fool more inclined to the ‘natural’ variety of slapstick as portrayed in Chris Harris’ inimitable one man show Kemp’s Jig. (Harris, n.d.) . Harris’ performance as Kemp theatrically counterpointed the tension between Shakespeare’s construction of the role in the text and the performers licence (or lack of) in embodying it as iterated sometime in the phrase:
“Let those who play your fools speak no more than is set down “ (Shakespeare, n.d.)

The witty fool may be an old trope, but it is also parodied in that most elegant of example of intelligent fooling, the Monty Python show, for who, who has witnessed it can ever forget John Cleese’ parody of the village idiot Arthur Figgis. (Cleese, et al., 1970) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjWYHeg8_5] Where the erstwhile “village idiot” when unobserved and not required to play the conventional role expected of him, reveals himself to be an erudite scholar.

This may seem some distance travel, from the Savant as portrayed in the books of Hermelin, Treffert and Howlin, but it is in a sense precisely the character portrayed by the rainman, whose role in the movie is certainly akin to that of the traditional wise fool, a trope to illustrate the foibles and folly of his protagonist brother.

In the modern construction of the savant, the sense of wonder and othering must be there, and it is accomplished by dismissing the talent, or skill and looking simply at the idiocy as something to contrast it with.

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