THE EPILEPSY OF FYODOR DOSTOIEVSKI.

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Kretschmer, in his *Psychology of Men of Genius*, drew attention to the frequent association of psychopathy in the mental make-up of individuals so gifted and so able as to be readily included in the class of "men of genius." Of all the individuals whom Kretschmer discusses, Dostoievski is the only one who is known for certainty to have been epileptic. Both the prophet Mohamet and the apostle Paul are mentioned as being traditionally regarded as having suffered from this malady, but for obvious reasons it is impossible to be certain of this. That an individual who ranks amongst the world's greatest novelists should, throughout his life, have suffered from epilepsy is in itself a remarkable and possibly unique thing. It is therefore of some interest to inquire in what manner epilepsy manifested itself in Dostoievski, how it influenced his work, and what light, if any, the manifestation of this condition in an individual of such intellectual power, throws on the nature of the epileptic state itself.

Little is known of Dostoievski's family apart from a somewhat brief survey of his more immediate relatives provided by his daughter, Aimee Dostoievski. One is immediately struck, however, even in this fragmentary description, by the high degree of psychopathy which must have been present in the family.

His father was a doctor. He had quarrelled with his parents, and at the age of fifteen had run away from his home in the Ukraine and gone to Moscow, where he studied medicine. He would never speak of his family spontaneously, nor make any answer when questioned about them. He served in the army in the war of 1812, and later became superintendent of a large state hospital in Moscow. He was apparently a heavy drinker, and in his cups became very suspicious and violent. He was avaricious and extremely mean. Eventually he deteriorated to such a degree, and his drinking became so heavy, that he had to give up work, and retired to his country estate. Here he was eventually murdered by some of his serfs, apparently as a result of his cruel behaviour in his dealing with them.

Dostoievski's mother is described as "very delicate" and retiring. They had seven children, four boys and three girls. Barbara, one of the girls, is described in the following terms by her niece:

"But the most miserable of the family was certainly my Aunt Barbara. She married a well-to-do man, who left her considerable household property in Moscow. The houses brought in a good income, my aunt's children were comfortably settled in life and lacked nothing, and she had therefore everything that was necessary to ensure her comfort; but the unhappy woman was the victim of a sordid and diseased avarice. She opened her purse with a kind of loathing; the smallest expenditure was a torture to her. She finally dismissed her servants to avoid paying their wages. She had no fires in her apartments, and spent the winter wrapped in her cloak. She did no cooking; twice a week she went out and bought a little bread and milk. There was a

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great deal of gossip in the neighbourhood where she lived about her inexplicable behaviour. Eventually two peasants got into her home one night and murdered her in the hope of finding her hoard of money."

Mihail the eldest and Nicolas the youngest of the brothers are described as having been very heavy drinkers. Though the former seems to have been able to work and support himself, the latter, after a brilliant course of study, was never able to do anything, and had to be supported for the rest of his life by the family.

Mihail's sons are all referred to as "drunkards." Barbara's son is said to have been "so stupid that his folly verged on idiocy."

There is no reason to suppose that Aimee Dostoievski set out with the deliberate intention of showing all her father's family in an unfavourable light. When, therefore, she remarks in conclusion the "the whole Dostoievski family suffered from neurasthenia," she is presumably only drawing attention to a very obviously high incidence of psychopathy among his immediate relatives. There is no evidence that any other member of the family suffered from frank epilepsy, nor is there any suggestion that any of them was outstandingly gifted intellectually.

Fyodor Dostoievski was born in 1820. According to family tradition it was when he heard of his father's violent death that he had his first epileptic fit. This was in 1839. However, the fits did not apparently occur with any frequency till about ten years later, when he was imprisoned in Siberia, and after that time they continued for the rest of his life. Most of the attacks he had were typical *grand mal*, but it is probable that at times he suffered momentary alterations of consciousness corresponding to *petit mal*. Thus in a letter to his brother Mihail in 1854 he refers to "strange attacks resembling epilepsy and yet not epilepsy," and in his novels one occasionally comes across a description of a typical *petit mal* which is presumably culled from his own experiences. His second wife, in the diary which she kept, gives a detailed account of one of his major seizures. It is of particular interest because of the post-epileptic confusion and automatism that it describes.

"After dinner Fyodor had a cup of coffee, lay down at fire and asked me to wake him at half past. I also fell into a doze. But at twenty minutes past five Fyodor got up, came up to my bed and kissed me. I said 'What is the matter Fyodor?' He turned back, but suddenly fell into an epileptic fit. I got very frightened; I wanted to take him to his bed, but I could not manage it in time. So I propped him up against my bed for I had not the strength to put him on it. He half stood all the time the convulsions lasted (and that is why his right leg is now aching, because he had leant against the wall). When the convulsions were over, Fyodor began tossing about, and although I tried my best to keep him quiet, I had not the strength to manage it. Then I put two cushions on the floor and quietly placed him on them, so that he should lie more comfortably. I unbuttoned his clothes so that he could breathe more freely. To-day I noticed for the first time that his lips turned quite blue, and his face unusually red. How unhappy I was! This time he did not come round for a rather long time, and when he began to do so, however bitterly and painfully I felt, I had a desire to laugh, for any words he uttered were spoken

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in German. He said '*Was? Was doch? Lassen sie mich,*' and went on with a long string of German phrases. Then he called me by my pet name and asked for forgiveness; but he could not make out what I was saying to him. He also asked me for money to go off to the tables. A fine player, I thought, to play in this state! When Fyodor recovered he got up from the floor, buttoned himself up and asked me to give him his hat. I thought, does he want to go somewhere now? and I asked him, 'Where are you going?' '*Comme ça,*' was his reply. I could not make out and asked him to repeat what he said, for I thought he was going out for sausages. Then I persuaded him to lie down, which he did not want to do, and even began grumbling. 'Why was I trying to put him to bed, why was I fomenting him?' At last he lay down, but slept by snatches, waking every ten minutes. At seven o'clock we went out for a walk, but Fyodor suddenly wanted to kiss my hand in the street, and said that if I did not let him do it, he would not consider me his wife. Of course I tried my best to dissuade him; in the middle of the street, with people looking on—it would be terribly ridiculous. Then Fyodor said he would very much like to have some chocolate. Although a glass of chocolate costs eighteen kreutzer, I agreed and we went into a café." It is worth mentioning that Dostoievski spoke German very poorly, and also that at this time the Dostoievskis were in a state of absolute poverty, and buying a glass of chocolate would have been in his normal senses an unheard of luxury.

After each attack the muddling of his thoughts and temporary loss of memory persisted usually for several days, and this, of course, when the fits occurred with any frequency, played havoc with his work. Thus we find him writing to his friend, A. N. Maikov: "Of my work I will write you nothing, for I have nothing to say about it yet. Only one thing: I have to go at it hard, very hard indeed. In the intervals my attacks rob me of all vitality, and after each one I can't collect my thoughts for at least four days. . . . And the novel is my one means of salvation. The worst of it is that it must absolutely come off. Nothing less will do, that's a *sine qua non*. But how can it when all my capabilities are utterly crippled by my malady! I still have my power of vision intact, of late my work has shown me that, and nerves I have still. But I have lost all memory."

The fits appear to have occurred at their best every three or four months, and at their worst every few days. It is therefore of some significance to record that despite the fact that after the age of 25 or 30 he had repeated *grand mal* for the rest of his life, and that after each one a certain degree of confusion or memory defect occurred for a few days, no obvious permanent intellectual deterioration seems to have developed. Thus, perhaps his greatest work of all, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was published in 1880, at the age of 60, and only one year before his death. Most psychiatrists consider that intellectual deterioration in epileptics, particularly those in whom the fits are uncontrolled, is a fairly frequent occurrence. Curran and Guttman, for example, state that at least two-thirds of all epileptics show progressive deterioration, and that there is a correlation between the deterioration and the number of fits. Furthermore, one would expect theoretically that such deterioration would be more immediately apparent and perhaps a more gross thing, in a

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highly gifted and sensitive intellect, than in one which is only average or perhaps dull.

What is of most interest, however, is the peculiar psychic aura which appeared to precede the fits. It was an alteration of consciousness associated with a feeling of exaltation, and a sense of time, as it were, standing still. He gives the clearest account of this in *The Possessed*, where the character Kirillov says, " There are seconds—they come five or six at a time—when you suddenly feel the presence of the eternal harmony properly attained. It's something not earthly—I don't mean in the sense that it's heavenly—but in the sense that a man cannot endure it in his earthly aspect. He must be physically changed or die. This feeling is clear and unmistakeable; it's as though you apprehend all nature and suddenly you say, ' Yes, that's right.' God when he created the world said at the end of each day of creation, ' Yes, it's right, it's good.' It . . . it's not being deeply moved, but simply joy. You don't forgive anything because there's no need of forgiveness. It's not that you love—Oh there's in it something higher than love—what's most awful is that it's terribly clear and such joy. If it lasts more than five seconds the soul could not endure it and must perish. In those five seconds I live through a lifetime, and I'd give my whole life for them, because they are worth it. To endure ten seconds one must be physically changed . . ." ' Kirillov, does this often happen ? ' ' Once in three days, or once in a week.' ' Don't you have fits perhaps ? ' ' No.' ' Well you will. Be careful Kirillov, I've heard that's just how fits begin. An epileptic described just that sensation before a fit, word for word as you've done. He mentioned five seconds too, and said that more could not be endured. Remember Mohamet's pitcher, from which no drop of water was spilt while he circled Paradise on his horse. That was a case of five seconds too; that's too much like your eternal harmony and Mohamet was an epileptic. Be careful Kirillov, it's epilepsy ! ' "

It is such a rare event to come across anyone suffering from alterations of consciousness which are known to be associated with specific pathological conditions, and who is also sufficiently gifted to be able to describe with any precision the quality of that state, that the above description would seem to be well worthy of a place in the literature of epilepsy.

It is quite clear that these transient alterations in consciousness associated with such feelings of exaltation made a profound impression on Dostoievski. It is also apparent from the above quotation that he appreciated the central problem common to all religious and mystical thinkers who base themselves on unusual and peculiar states of consciousness, that is, whether such states are pathological curiosities or are manifestations of divine or occult inspiration.

Another aspect of the fits to which Dostoievski refers is an overpowering feeling of guilt as though he had committed some crime which then kept on haunting him. This feeling developed after the fit and had, not surprisingly, a very depressing effect.

Most authors dealing with essential epilepsy draw attention to a group of personality traits, which tend not infrequently to be seen in epileptics. While these are by no means always detectable, the clinical association is sufficiently

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frequent for this group of traits to have become regarded as typical of the epileptic personality. Selfish egocentricity, excessive suspiciousness of the motives and actions of others, hyperirritability, and quarrelsomeness; these are the main features of this sort of personality. They are often outwardly submissive and in a peculiarly circumstantial way polite, and this may give the impression of great humility. They fall into violent and uncontrollable rages. They very frequently become religious and devout, but this is more usually a religiosity without deep feeling, and a devotion without zeal. They are intolerant or bigoted. "They are considerate without being kind, . . . they will work for praise but not for love" (MacCurdy).

We know that Dostoievski understood the way the epileptic temperament characteristically manifests itself, because in the character Smerdyakov, the epileptic in *The Brothers Karamozov*, he drew a careful picture of this. Here is the typical epileptic personality of the psychiatric text-book. He is egotistic, conceited, irritable and sanctimonious. He grew up "with no sense of gratitude." "He seemed to look at the world mistrustfully." He is asocial, and yet interfering and aggressive. Dostoievski gives us here a detailed and rich picture of the many facets of this type of personality. Whether or not he derived it from observations of other epileptics or by an intuitive process from experience of inner tendencies in his own personality it is not possible to say. However, there is no doubt that he connects it closely with the epileptic process, and does not regard it as something fortuitous.

How far are such personality traits to be discerned in Dostoievski himself?

Clearly in a personality so complex and in many ways so fortuitous as his, this is an extremely difficult question to answer in a balanced manner. One has the impression however that, in his waywardness, his irritability, his frequent differences with his associates, the persistent turbulence and difficulties which he encounters in his various social and family relationships, his uncontrollable mania for gambling, and his abject and at times almost grotesque humility, there is an underlying stratum in his personality closely akin to that regarded as typically epileptic. Of course in an individual of such intellect and sensitivity, one would not expect such traits to approach the crudity of expression that is seen in the more usual type of epileptics.

In this connection it is worth considering in a little more detail one aspect of Dostoievski's personality, which perhaps dominates more than anything else his outlook and his work. We refer to his peculiar religious mysticism, and his sense of profound humility that emanated from this. It is difficult to describe briefly the contents of Dostoievski's religious thought. It is essentially individualist and personal, and to a large extent hostile to the organized Church. His position is perhaps best summed up by André Gide, himself a Catholic and also a distinguished literary critic:

"Dostoievski abhors all Churches, the Church of Rome in particular. He claims it his right to accept Christ's teaching directly from the Scriptures and from them alone. . . . Neither behest nor ruling; simply the secret of the supreme felicity revealed by Jesus Christ in the Gospels: 'If ye know these things, happy are ye, if ye do them.' (John XIII, 17). Not 'happy shall ye be,' but 'happy are ye.' Here and now we can share in that perfect bliss.

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What serenity! Time indeed ceases to exist: eternity lives, we inherit the kingdom of God.

"Yes, here is the mysterious essence of Dostoievski's philosophy and of Christian ethics too; the divine secret of happiness. The individual triumphs by renunciation of his individuality. He who lives his life, cherishing personality, shall lose it; but he who surrenders it shall gain the fullness of life eternal, not in the future, but in the present made one with eternity. Resurrection in the fullness of life, forgetful of all individual happiness."

This is the conception that pervades the whole of Dostoievski's work.

Now Kretschmer has remarked that it is no accident that an inclination to religion is particularly encountered in those who suffer from bizarre experiences and peculiar alterations in consciousness. In particular, this is seen frequently in epileptics and schizophrenics. He explains this by arguing that the threat to the integrity of the whole personality felt by the patient in his inward experience of the disease process is projected outwards into the cosmos. "There arises a compelling sense of great metaphysical connections, a profound oneness with the universe and with Godliness, everything is brilliantly lit up, clear as the edge of a precipice, strangely threatening." Hence arises the feeling of divine inspiration and the consequent mystical or religious outlook.

What is extremely interesting, as Gide points out, is that Dostoievski himself seems to have seen this connection between the states of exaltation which formed the aura of the fits and his religious ethic. We frequently find in his novels an epileptic expressing in one form or another this religious outlook and relating it to his epileptic attacks. Thus in *The Idiot* we find Prince Myshkin saying to Rogozhin, "At that moment—at that moment I seem somehow to understand the extraordinary saying that there shall be no more time." "You've begun to believe in future eternal life?" "No, not in a future eternal life, but in eternal life here. There are moments, you reach moments, and time suddenly stands still and it will become eternal."

The moments he is referring to are those just prior to the fits. Again, in the passage quoted earlier from *The Possessed*, we find the same view expressed.

Thus it seems reasonable to argue that the religious mysticism which dominates Dostoievski's life originates in very much the same way as the religiosity of the average epileptic. That is, it springs out of the particular character of his emotional experiences. That the one should have a rich content and great depth and the other should be superficial, arises presumably from the fact that the one takes shape in a great intellect and the other in a comparatively dull one.

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