Literature and medicine

On the good use of epilepsy by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Ivan Iniesta

This column explores the links and synergies between medicine and literature. What roles can literature play in reflecting and influencing good practice, and what sorts of images of doctoring are to be found in drama, poetry, fiction, biography, electronic fora and film? The editors would be pleased to receive short papers, ranging from 500–1,000 words, on relevant topics. Those interested in contributing should email brian.hurwitz@kcl.ac.uk or neil.vickers@kcl.ac.uk

In a letter to his colleague and literary rival, Ivan Turgueniev, dated 17 June 1863, the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, revealed his intentions of going abroad in pursuit of medical advice from eminent neurologists:

> *I am very ill with epilepsy, which is getting worse and worse and driving me to despair. If only you knew how dejected I feel after my fits, sometimes for whole weeks on end! Actually, I am going to Berlin and to Paris – but for the shortest possible time – for no other reason than to consult specialists on epilepsy (Trosseau in Paris, Ramberg in Berlin). There are just no specialists in Russia, and I receive such a variety of contradictory advice from the local doctors that I have lost all faith in them.*[1]

It remains uncertain whether the consultations actually took place, but Dostoevsky had previously sought help from doctors within Russia, including one mentioned in a letter written from Siberia to his older brother, Mikhail, on 9 March 1857:

> *On the way back (we came through Barnaul), I quite unexpectedly had an epileptic fit that scared my wife to death and filled me with sadness and depression. The doctor (a learned and competent one) told me that, notwithstanding what other doctors had previously told me, I had real epilepsy and that I could expect to suffocate during one of the fits as a result of throat spasm…. In general, he advised me to beware of the new moon.*[1]

Interestingly, Moritz Heinrich Romberg (not 'Ramberg', as misspelled in the 1863 letter) also appears to have believed in the link between the neurological condition and the moon. In the mid-1840s, Romberg noted that:

> *The planetary influence of the moon (especially of the new and full moon) upon the course of epilepsy, was known to the ancients, and although here and there doubts have been raised against this view, the accurate observations of others have established its correctness.*[2]

Contrary to what Dostoevsky implied, his epilepsy does not seem to have started when he was in Siberia (1850–9), but most probably in the late 1830s or early 1840s, as several firsthand accounts from his contemporaries suggest. In October 1844, during a walk along Troitsky Street with Grigorovitch, his former roommate at the Military Academy of Engineers, Dostoevsky experienced a serious epileptic fit.[3] The first physician to witness the after effects of his seizures, however, was Dr Stefan Ianovsky, with whom the writer would develop a lifelong friendship. On 7 July 1847, Ianovsky observed:

> *As soon as I approached the Hay Market Square, I saw Fyodor Mikhailovich. He was bareheaded, his coat was unbuttoned, and his tie was loosened. Some officer in a military uniform was supporting him by the elbow.*[3]

Dostoevsky's epilepsy has been the subject of some debate among 20th century neurologists and several paleodiagnoses have been attempted.[4] Based on modern diagnostic criteria, Dostoevsky's disease falls into the category of cryptogenic localisation-related epilepsy. Here the interest is to understand the condition in light of his novels, correspondence and through the eyes of his contemporaries. In particular, how does Dostoevsky react to epilepsy and incorporate his own suffering into his art?[5]

Dostoevsky's first depiction of the condition in *The Landlady* (1847) is striking: Murin, an old landlord, suffers an attack in which his body is 'racked by convulsions', his face 'distorted with agony' and foam is 'visible on his twisted lips'.[6] Dostoevsky's knowledge of the condition subsequently grows in depth and subtlety. In *The Devils* (1872), when asked by Shatov whether he has ever experienced 'moments of eternal harmony', Kirillov replies: 'There are seconds; usually no more than five or six at a time; when you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony' and this happens '[o]nce every three days, once a week'. But when Shatov challenges him directly: 'Do you have epilepsy?' he replies, 'No'. 'Well, you will,' Shatov responds. 'Watch out, Kirillov, I've heard that's just the way epilepsy begins. An epileptic once described in detail his sensation before a seizure just the way you did'.[7]

In his memoirs about Dostoevsky, Strakhov, his friend and poet, points to a remarkable parallelism between Dostoevsky's own reality and his fiction:

> *This fit of illness was not actually very strong. He trembled, his whole body beat with the convulsions, and, in the corner of*

his mouth, there appeared flakes of foam…. Fyodor Mikhailovich told me many times that before a fit of illness he reached an elevated state…. 'For several moments' he said, 'I feel a happiness, which is not possible in a usual state, and usual people cannot understand it. I feel completely at harmony with myself, and with the whole world, and this feeling is so strong, and so sweet.'[3]

Dostoevsky made intelligent use of his condition. Firstly, it aided his escape from the perpetual military servitude to which he had been condemned in 1849 by Tzar Nicholas I (on the grounds of clandestine reunions held within the so-called Petrachevski circle). His army physician, Dr Ermakov, raised the matter with the new (not so tyrannical) Tzar Alexander II:

Dostoyevsky had his first serious seizure of epilepsy in 1850…. In 1853 he had another seizure, and now he has seizures each month. His present state of health is very weak…. For several years he suffered from epilepsy, and now, as he is deteriorating from the disease, he cannot stay in the service of Your Majesty any longer.[3]

He also turned to his epilepsy for a more than reasonable excuse to postpone delivery of chapters of his periodical publications, including *Notes of the Fatherland* (mid-1840s) and *A Writer's Diary* (1873–81). But it is in his writings that Dostoevsky makes elaborate use of the disease experience.[8] On his return from exile, he makes the young orphan girl, Elena, in *The Humiliated and Injured* (1861) suffer from epilepsy and follows this in *The Idiot*, with a remarkably elaborate portrayal of the epileptic process in Prince Myshkin. The last epileptic character to appear in his novels is Smerdiákov, the servant and stepbrother of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), who at one point simulates a seizure to cover up his parricide.

Most of Dostoevsky's novels are influenced by his own experience and profound knowledge of epilepsy with a less explicit, but nevertheless notable, presence in *The House of the Dead* (1862), *The Underground Man* (1865) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866), which represent further examples of the good use of a common disease by a remarkable writer.

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References

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