

Dostoyevsky and epilepsy

Between science and mystique

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ABSTRACT

This article, the result of a research project presented as a Master's degree dissertation in the graduate program of "Teaching of Health Education" at UNIFESP, seeks to highlight the pertinence of analyzing epilepsy and especially, the paradoxical experience of the epileptic individual through literary narrative. Using as its object the novel, *The Idiot*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, it seeks to discuss the relationship between epilepsy and the mystic experience, bearing in mind the context of the scientific and humanistic perspectives of the 19th century and today.

Key words: epilepsy, literature.

Dostoiévski e a epilepsia: entre a ciência e a mística

RESUMO

Este artigo, fruto de uma pesquisa apresentada como dissertação de mestrado junto ao programa de pós-graduação "Ensino em Ciências da Saúde" da UNIFESP, procura apontar a pertinência de se analisar a epilepsia e, principalmente, a paradoxal experiência do epilético através da narrativa literária. Tomando como objeto o romance *O Idiota*, de Fiódor Dostoiévski, procura-se discutir a relação entre epilepsia e experiência mística, considerando o contexto das perspectivas científicas e humanísticas do século XIX e de hoje.

Palavras-chave: epilepsia, literatura.

Since antiquity, epilepsy has been one of the pathological manifestations that most arouses interest in various traditions and cultures. Even in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (set of texts attributed to the Greek physician, Hippocrates of Cos) in the 6th century B.C., we can find an entire treatise dedicated to epilepsy entitled *On the Sacred Disease*¹, in which, for the first time in western Medicine, a "scientific" or "philosophical" view of the illness seeks to position itself ahead of the magical-religious view of epilepsy. Refuting the traditional interpretation, i.e., of the lay person (ιδιοτης) that epilepsy (επιληψις = attack – act of grabbing) is the fruit of a "divine possession", the Hippocratic text, consistent with its philosophical presuppositions, attributed the pathology to natural, physical causes.

This concept gradually solidified over

the course of centuries, and the advent of Modern Medicine, in the 19th century, sacralized it. Nevertheless, other versions, in divergence with the scientific perspective, did not cease to exist and even co-existed along side with modern concepts, often affording new forms of seeing and considering the issue of health and disease. These views could not be dismissed as results of "superstitions" or "mythical" and "outdated" concepts, since many times they include curious and even surprising perspectives that indicate unusual approaches to the health-disease process.

That is the case of the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), when he wrights about epilepsy.

Dostoyevsky and epilepsy

Dostoyevsky experienced this neurological disorder, suffering through various

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epileptic attacks at different times of his life²⁻⁴ and, in a way, transported this experience to his literary creation at assorted times and through several characters. However, it was in one of his most well-known novels, *The Idiot*⁵, published originally in 1868, that Dostoyevsky covered the issue of epilepsy as a central theme, presenting numerous references to this illness by means of the main character, Prince Myshkin^{6,4}.

Dostoyevsky's approach to epilepsy is different from the concepts prevalent at that time when Medical Sciences were developing even further the experimental paradigms and deepening knowledge of the biological bases of diseases. On the other hand, this author approaches and recovers the prevailing popular magical-religious view of Ancient Greece, since this disease is seen and experienced as a disorder that generates suffering and pain, but paradoxically, at the same time, involves the sufferer in a mystical and sublime experience. Thus, for Dostoyevsky, the experience of the disease is an opportunity to amplify the horizons of the human being, pointing towards the possibility of overcoming the pain that accompanies it and is placed as something that needs to be experienced during the illness. Nonetheless, beyond the physical, psychological, social, existential suffering, there is a transcendental or metaphysical dimension that involves the epilepsy experience⁴.

In this way, one can identify in Dostoyevsky a close relationship between epilepsy and the mystic experience, starting from the fact that the epileptic attack is understood as "being affected," "suffering," and "being overcome by extraordinary forces," similar to the mythical and mystical experience described by the Greeks, in which the epileptic person, during the crisis, is "overtaken by the gods".

Mystical experience and epilepsy

Etymologically, the term *mystique* (μυστικός), has its origin in the Greek language stemming from the verb *myeo*, which means to initiate, originating the word *mystes*, meaning "the initiate"⁷.

In Ancient Greece, to be initiated meant to be initiated in the mysteries, i.e., into the secrets that were introduced through secret rituals that were voluntary, not mandatory, personal, and exclusive in nature, with the intention of undergoing a transformation to a new mood by experiencing the sacred⁵. Therefore, when being initiated into mysteries, the neophyte pledged not to publicly reveal the secrets, because it was believed that if he did, they would lose their meaning, prestige, and power of transformation. During the initiation rituals, when the "logos of the gods" were revealed, through an oath of secrecy the initiate took on the obligation to not speak about what happened within those sacred ceremonies at the risk of suffering severe punishment⁷.

In Dostoyevsky's text, the experience of epilepsy carries a connotation of mystery that is not revealed except through the personal and internal experience of the subject (Prince Myshkin), or to the reader, through projections of his symbolic imagination⁸.

When being initiated into the mysteries, the initiate was confronted with the experience of death and resurrection, going through mortal catastrophe until the saving resurrection. Similarly, in Dostoyevsky's work, before and after the crisis, the epileptic subject intensely feels the experience of death and rebirth.

The description that Dostoyevsky makes of the epileptic crisis through Prince Myshkin reveals this approximation between epilepsy and the mystic experience since the crisis seems to be "an initiation into the mysteries and deep secrets of existence,"⁷ in which the epileptic person goes through an extraordinary experience that deeply transforms him; however, when it is spoken of or communicated, it loses its meaning and strength since words cannot describe the grandiosity of the happening.

As is true with the mystical experience, epilepsy leads to a modification of the state of consciousness, with a deep change in perception at the time of the epileptic attack. As Myshkin describes the epileptic attack, "...there is an extraordinary intensification of self-consciousness and auto-sensation of the immediate at the highest degree..."⁵.

Another aspect common to the mystic experience and the epileptic crisis is the deep feeling of communion with the totality reported by the character, "...it is the culmination of harmony, of beauty, of an unparalleled and unexpected feeling of fullness, of conciliation and ecstatic fusion, and the most supreme synthesis of life..."⁵.

In Myshkin's description, the epileptic attack is an extreme experience that includes something mystical in which the person lives paradoxically the deep and infinite dimension of each sensation, feeling, and thought, since while it involves loss of memory, interruption of the logical flow of thought, disconnected ideas, unbearable sadness, terrible estrangement, pressure in the brain and darkness in the soul, on the other hand, the mind and heart are lit by an "extraordinary Light, an unending joy is wholly felt, all afflictions are calmed, all the habitations of Allah are contemplated, a moment for which one could exchange one's entire life"⁵.

One can conclude, therefore, that both the popular concept that prevailed in Ancient Greece, and Dostoyevsky's concept, share in the mystical aspect of epilepsy, where the body and soul are taken, altered, and amplified by a divine gift, i.e., by universal forces, in which regardless of the subject's own will, he is chosen, for some unknown reason, for the manifestation of powers that transcend and escape the control of mortals.

Thus, the mystique is in the acceptance of epilepsy as

a divine gift and in submission of oneself, with no resistance, defense, or attempt of control in order to live the control exerted by divine and extraordinary forces. According to Myshkin's report, the feelings at the moment of the attack are, "a superior peace, filled with serene and harmonious joy, with hope full of reason and with a definitive cause..."⁵.

This mystical experience of epilepsy also corresponds to the experience of God described by Russian Orthodox Theology, with which Dostoyevsky had a deep affinity. In orthodox mysticism, God can only truly be known through inner and personal experience as each person lives it, and is incommunicable and cannot be explained or described in words⁹.

Therefore, both the mystic experience and the experience of the epileptic attack, due to the attributes of grandiosity, approximate man to the divine and lead to transcendence.

These may also be the reasons why Siberian shamanic tribes chose epileptic individuals to become shamans and follow the magical-religious path to become "masters of ecstasy"^{10,11}.

Another view of the disease

The experiences of death and new birth, common in the narratives of orthodox mystique and also in the religions of mysteries in Ancient Greece, can be found to in the Dostoyevsky's descriptions of the epileptic attack. According to the testimony of Prince Myshkin, at this moment, it is "...as if that which is human disappears," but it is followed by "an interior and strange Light illumines the soul"⁵.

No doubt, this perspective described by Dostoyevsky, clearly confronted the view that was held until then by

modern science. However, in his work, the writer of Saint Petersburg does not seek to defend a "mystification" of the disease against a scientific approach, per se. Without negating the importance of scientific research and the modern view of pathology – which is very clear in the defense he made of the physician who cared for Myshkin in Switzerland, "through modern, albeit very humane methods,"⁵ – Dostoyevsky seeks to highlight the dimension of the subjective experience of the person who suffers from the illness. Breaking away from the merely rationalistic and scientific view of the pathological phenomenon, the author opens the way to an approach that expands the horizons of understanding and of human experience into multiple and transcendental dimensions, which is, simultaneously a fundamentally humanistic lesson and an invitation to humanization.

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