

The Idiot, Dostoyevsky, and epilepsy

In a train running at full speed in the direction of Petersburg, Russia, on a foggy November morning, two passengers sit face to face, each wishing to speak to the other, and waiting for an opportunity. One is the merchant Parfen Rogoshin, about 27 years old, with curly almost black hair and small grey fiery eyes. The other, also of about the same age, is Lyow Nikolayevitch Myshkin, mostly referred to as "The Prince". His eyes are big, blue, calm, and quiet, but depressed: that peculiar expression from which some people at the first glance guess that its owner is an epileptic. He is described as shy, naive, candid, true-hearted, pure and always modest in his answers.

In the story, the Prince falls in love with Nastasja, of exquisite beauty, eccentric, an orphan, raised and later kept by a wealthy merchant. The more he learns about her past, the more he feels compassion for her, and his love becomes a platonic compassion. Meanwhile, Aglaja, the youngest of three daughters of a general a pretty, and determined

young lady, falls in love with him at their first meeting.

At a later date, in Petersburg, "...on the street, it occurred to him suddenly that something very strange, which had troubled him for hours, became clear to him. Consciously, he caught himself in an occupation which he had continued for a long time, but had not been aware of: namely, for several hours he had begun, time and again, to seek something about his person. Sometimes he had forgotten it again, for half-hours; then suddenly he would begin again looking all over for something.

"But as soon as he became aware of this morbid, up to now unconscious impulse in him, another remembrance flashed upon his mind and interested him greatly; he remembered that at the moment when he became conscious of looking for something, he had arrested himself in front of a shop-window and examined the goods on exhibition there. At present, he was anxious to determine whether he

had indeed stopped in front of this shop-window, perhaps five minutes ago, or whether it had merely seemed so to him and he had been mistaken...

"...He remembered that in his epileptic condition almost immediately before a seizure (provided it happened while awake) there had been a phase, when suddenly amidst sadness and darkness of the soul and amidst depression, his brain had flashed up as it were, and for moments all his vital forces had become intensified with extraordinary energy. The life sensation and the consciousness of the own personality increased ten-fold at such moments, which lasted no longer than a flash.

"Reason and mind were permeated by an unusual light, all his excitement, all his doubts, all his anxieties were soothed at once, dissolved into a superior quiet full of harmonious joy and hope, replete with good sense and understanding of the ultimate causes. But these moments, these flashlights, were merely the premonitory signs of that last decisive second with which the seizure proper began. This second, indeed, was unbearable. He arrived at these conclusions: 'What does it matter that this is disease, that it is abnormal tension, provided that the result, the instant of this sensation, appears to him who remembers it after the state of health is re-established, as the climax of harmony and beauty, and lends to him a sensation, so far never anticipated, of completeness, symmetry, reconciliation and of enchanted, prayerful blending with the highest synthesis of life?' These were no dream-like visions as are the consequence of indulging in hashish, opium or alcohol; unnatural, insubstantial visions which depress the thinking faculty and damage the mind. When during that second, namely the last conscious moment before a seizure, sometimes he still was able to say: 'Yes, for this moment one could give the whole life!.' "

In one dramatic moment, "...in the doorway it was now completely dark; the thundercloud, having swallowed the twilight, opened up the very moment the Prince approached the house and poured down its rain. Suddenly he beheld, in the semi-dark of the passage, a man. This man appeared to wait for something, yet flitted swiftly away and disappeared... This man was surely Rogoshin. A moment after, he hurried after him, up the stairway. His heart stopped beating. 'Now, all will be decided immediately,' he said to himself with singular certainty.

"Suddenly the two eyes, the very same eyes, met his glance. For a second the two men stood very close, face to face; suddenly the Prince seized the other by the shoulders and turned him toward the stairway against the light: he wanted to see his face more distinctly. Rogoshin's eyes blazed forth, and an insane smile distorted his face. His right hand rushed upward, and something shone in it; it did not occur to the Prince to stay the hand. He merely remembered later to have called out: 'Parfen, I cannot believe it!'

"Then it seemed as if something suddenly opened up in front of him: an uncommon inner light illuminated his soul. This lasted perhaps half a second; yet the first sound of a frightful cry which broke forth spontaneously from his chest, and which he could not have withheld by any effort, he later clearly and consciously remembered. Then his

consciousness became extinct, and complete darkness set in. He had been seized with an epileptic attack after this disease had not visited him such a long time."

A feeling of sudden horror by the sight of a person seized by an epileptic attack makes Rogoshin suddenly grow stiff on the spot, and thus the Prince is saved from the otherwise inevitable thrust of the raised knife. Rogoshin runs, almost insensible, out of the hotel.

Then, there are the sad experiences of Nastasja, whom the Prince had wanted to marry out of compassion. "Compassion," he says, "is the most important and, perhaps, the only law for the control of all human existence."

In the final chapter, Nastasja had asked Rogoshin (who had run away with her, at the wedding night set by her with the Prince) to take her to his house in Petersburg. There, Rogoshin kills her, and then goes to fetch the Prince to spend the night with him in the very house. He went insane that night and later was sent to Siberia for fifteen years.

All the actors in this tragedy, *The Idiot*, have a bearing on the Prince's behaviour and deserve consideration in order to explain his noble and superior character. The abnormal decision of the Prince to marry Nastasja while he is betrothed to Aglaja can be accounted for by his suggestibility, his helplessness in a critical situation, and by his instinctive desire to express his compassion for the woman who is perpetually hovering on the borderline of insanity. Nothing short of reading the whole book can reveal Nastasja's repeated episodic acts due to an acute frantic delirium, or the Prince's occasional lofty irresponsibility.

The author, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the Russian novelist, was one of the greatest writers of the nineteenth century, who made the field of morbid psychology and psychiatry his own in so unique a way that alienists recognise his descriptions as masterpieces. It has been said that no physician, unless himself an epileptic, had ever described the onset of a seizure with such precision, as in this novel.

Yes, Dostoyevsky was an epileptic; his epilepsy affected and also influenced and inspired his work. "As soon as I arrived in Geneva," he wrote to a friend, "my fits began. And what fits! Every ten days a fit, and it took me five days to recover from it. After every attack I cannot collect my thoughts for four days.... And how can it (the novel) be good when all my faculties are utterly shattered by my illness? I have still my imagination, and it isn't a bad one at that; I tested it on my novel the other day. But my memory seems to have gone!"

He was also overwhelmed by "a feeling of terrible guilt" as though he had committed "some dreadful crime". But his feeling before the onset of the fit (as in the above excerpts from the novel) seemed to compensate for its terrible aftermath. "For a few moments before the fit," he wrote to a critic, "I experience a feeling of happiness such as it is quite impossible to imagine in a normal state and which other people have no idea of. I feel entirely in harmony with myself and the whole world, and this feeling is so strong and so delightful that for a few seconds of such bliss, one would gladly give up ten years of one's life, if not one's whole life!"

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