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The Beauty in the Epileptic: Dostoevsky’s Illness and its Mark on his Characters

Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky was known to suffer from epilepsy, and he depicted this illness through the experiences of several characters, notably Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* (1868–1869) and Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880). This paper examines Dostoevsky's accounts of his own seizures, then compares those accounts to the seizures that Myshkin and Smerdyakov experience. Considering Myshkin’s and Smerdyakov's epilepsy narrowly, in terms of Dostoevsky's own experiences with the disorder, and more broadly, in the Russian cultural context, where epilepsy was associated with both holy innocence and demonic possession, this paper argues that Myshkin experiences “pure form and beauty” during his seizures because he is striving for absolute beauty elsewhere in his life, while Smerdyakov, who experiences nothing akin to “bliss” during his seizures, lacks the innocent man’s “deeper spiritual […] insight.”¹ Smerdyakov, unlike Myshkin, is unable to see or understand divine beauty.²

This article examines how epilepsy contextualizes Myshkin’s and Smerdyakov's narrative experiences according to Robert Louis Jackson's framework for Dostoevsky's two opposing notions of beauty: essentially, there is only one true beauty—related to Plato's ideal beauty—but man, who ought to strive for this absolute, often “lose[s] his moral equilibrium and strive[s] for a different form of beauty, one that is monstrous, violent, and sensuous.”³ Jackson connects the experience of beauty with epilepsy when he asserts that “Prince Myshkin's own description of the 'highest moments' preceding his epileptic fits” is “the most dramatic expression in Dostoevsky's

¹ Jackson, 52.
² Ibid., 51.
³ Ibid., 43.
writing of man’s nostalgia before the infinite, his craving for beatitude […].” But, while Myshkin experiences “rapture” in the moment prior to his seizures, Smerdyakov finds the entire experience unbearable.

**Accounts of Dostoevsky's Seizures**

After years of suffering “some unspecified ‘nervous ailment,’” Dostoevsky had his first epileptic seizure in 1850. This first attack was “marked by shrieks, loss of consciousness, convulsive movements of the face and limbs, foam at the mouth, raucous breathing, and a feeble, rapid, and irregular pulse.”5 After a second “similar attack” in 1853, Dostoevsky experienced these seizures frequently, “on the average of once a month.”6

This condition was likely accelerated by the traumatic events of his early adulthood: in 1849, at the age of twenty-seven, Dostoevsky was held in solitary confinement, sentenced to death by firing squad, and endured a mock execution on a public square in St. Petersburg before being exiled to Siberia.7 While it would be incorrect to link the onset of Dostoevsky’s epilepsy directly to his mock execution, according to Frank this traumatic “sequence of events” “certainly contributed to the outbreak of Dostoevsky's epilepsy.”8

Almost immediately on his return to the Peter and Paul fortress after his mock execution, Dostoevsky wrote that this experience led him to a new Christian outlook on life.9 Frank recounts in detail the first letter that Dostoevsky wrote to his older brother Mikhail after the mock execution, highlighting the moment he discovered his sentence had been commuted.10 His “new grasp of

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4 Frank, *The Years of Ordeal*, 80.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 80–81; Rice, 3.
8 Frank, *The Years of Ordeal*, 80.
9 Ibid., 59–62.
10 Ibid.
existence” was “profoundly shaped by this confrontation with death” and the "primarily secular perspective from which Dostoevsky had previously viewed human life [sank] into the background.” The experience provoked a remarkable change within him: “everything in his previous life” was “severely judged as he turns back to contemplate it from, as it were, the edge of eternity.” In the letter, Dostoevsky wrote that “life is a gift, life is happiness, every minute can be an eternity of happiness” [Frank's italics] […] Now, in changing my life, I am reborn in a new form.” In the moment after his mock execution, Dostoevsky saw a “blinding truth,” a conviction of “infinite possibility” thrilling “every fiber of his being,” the scales falling from his eyes in a “rapturous apprehension of life.” This led to his new appreciation of “the unconditional and absolute Christian commandment of mutual, all-forgiving, and all-embracing love.”

While Frank rejects any direct connection between Dostoevsky's mock execution experience and the onset of his epilepsy as having only “a certain poetic truth, […] not a literal one […],” Dostoevsky's shift toward Christianity certainly influenced his experience with the disorder. His friend Sofia Kovalevskaya, a mathematician who consulted with “medical specialists before writing her memoirs (1887–1889),” reported in a first-hand account of one of his attacks how the author filtered his experience of a divine light in the moment before his seizures through his renewed appreciation of Christianity: “‘I felt,’ said F[yodor] M[ikhailovich], ‘that heaven descended to earth and swallowed me. I really attained God, and was imbued with him.’” In these moments, Dostoevsky describes a tantalizing glimpse of further connection to divinity.

11 Ibid., 59–60.
12 Ibid., 62.
13 Cited in Frank, The Years of Ordeal, 62.
14 Frank, The Years of Ordeal, 62.
15 Ibid., 63.
16 Ibid., 80.
17 Ineista, 285; Cited in Rice, 84.
even though what follows is pain and loss of consciousness. Because he has chosen to idealize divine beauty in his pursuit of eternal happiness, he finds momentary solace and rapture that supersedes the seizure accompanying it. Elsewhere, Dostoevsky describes this feeling as so desirable that he would “give up ten years of life, perhaps all life” for “a few seconds of such bliss […],” seemingly reassessing the violent experience of seizure itself.18

The ecstatic bliss that he experiences contrasts with the monstrous and demonic physical nature of an attack, particularly as witnessed by onlookers. According to his wife Anna’s accounts, during his seizures Dostoevsky typically “uttered a terrible, inhuman cry,” his “face [grew] contorted by convulsions,” and “his body sh[ook] all over.”19

Dostoevsky frequently addressed epilepsy through his characters, a topic that many scholars have addressed from a variety of viewpoints, including Sigmund Freud in his 1928 essay “Dostoevsky and Parricide.” More recent scholarship, including Paul Fung's 2014 book Dostoevsky and the Epileptic Mode of Being, continues to explore the connection between Dostoevsky's own experiences with the disorder and those of his characters. Fung sees a “contradictory pattern of epilepsy” in which an ecstatic moment immediately precedes the seizure.20 This ecstasy is quickly destroyed by the pain that follows. Fung observes that “these moments are both rapturous and unbearable” for the characters, including Myshkin, that experience this type of seizure.21 Rejecting an earlier hypothesis that these seizures reflect “the building-up of an intense consciousness and the cancellation of it[,]” Fung explains that, “rather

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18 Ibid., 83–84.
19 Ibid., 280. Citing an account from Dostoevsky’s wife, Anna Dostoevskaia.
20 Fung, 3–4.
21 Ibid.
than playing the role of a guard or safety valve, [the seizure] represents a much more radical moment where all these desires are destroyed.”

Taking this into account, this paper argues that a character's desire impacts his experience of seizures. Like Dostoevsky, Myshkin experiences a moment of bliss and ecstasy before a seizure because of his desire to recognize the divine. Due to his lack of faith, Smerdyakov has a contrasting experience with his seizures. This ability to see and understand eternal bliss connects directly to Jackson’s discussion of the ability to appreciate ideal beauty, where one experiences “the visible symbol of the beauty of God.”

“Two Kinds of Beauty”

In The Brothers Karamazov, Dmitry observes that “beauty is not only frightening but a mystery as well. That’s where God and the devil join battle, and their battlefield is the heart of man.” Dmitry Karamazov, of course, “is not Dostoevsky,” and refracts rather than reflects the writer's view of beauty. In his essay “Two Kinds of Beauty,” Jackson carefully distinguishes between Dmitry's views and those of the author, noting Dostoevsky's “unwavering commitment to the notion of ideal beauty,” which builds “a central Christian structure” on a “classical foundation.” In other words, for Dostoevsky beauty and morality are linked, while Dmitry, envisioning beauty as the battlefield of good and evil, separates the aesthetic value of beauty from its moral context. As Jackson details, Dostoevsky envisioned two opposing kinds of beauty on a

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22 Ibid.
23 Jackson, 47.
24 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, 140.
25 Jackson, 63.
26 Ibid., 65.
moral-aesthetic basis; the first type being “true, higher beauty,” the other “a low order of aesthetic sensation […] which [man] calls beauty.”

The first type, ideal or “healthy” beauty, is associated with all of “man’s noblest ideals and aspirations.” This beauty is directly associated with the divine: the spiritual nature of man aspires to beauty at its “highest good and eternal truth.” Those who strive for this divine beauty, like Myshkin and Dostoevsky himself, can experience sheer rapture and bliss even in a moment, like those preceding epileptic seizures, that would otherwise be filled with violence and pain. Dostoevsky notes that “one must be morally rather highly purified […] to look at this divine beauty without confusion.”

Man experiences the second, lower order of beauty when he “loses his moral equilibrium” and his desire for ideal beauty vanishes. After his “moral-aesthetic disintegration,” he finds beauty in Sodom, in acts of violence and pleasure. In an 1860 notebook, Dostoevsky writes that “[m]an strives on earth for an ideal which is contrary to his human nature,” his “sinful nature prevent[ing] him from seeing divine beauty.” He continues that if man is not “morally purified,” he would “confuse” divine beauty. Thus the man who is not able to observe the divine may not be able to see the “truth” that lies in beauty. This second type of beauty is appealing because of

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27 Ibid., 64.
28 Ibid., 42.
29 Ibid., 44.
30 Ibid., 57.
31 Ibid., 43.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 57.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 56.
its temporality, because it appeals to the “carnal nature” in humankind rather than the spiritual one.  

Both Myshkin and Dostoevsky experience a moment of bliss and ecstasy before a seizure because of their ability to recognize the divine. In contrast to the innocent and receptive Myshkin, Smerdyakov is an angry misanthrope who cuts himself off from the world. His epilepsy thus brings him no closer to ideal beauty. Instead of experiencing brief moments of ecstasy, Smerdyakov dissects and analyzes various phenomena at length until he rejects them, as he rejects the Bible and then books altogether. Because of his lack of faith, Smerdyakov experiences epileptic seizures without any accompanying higher aesthetic experience.

**Prince Myshkin and the Holy Fool, Smerdyakov and Demonic Possession**

Myshkin demonstrates the view of epilepsy as a sacred illness, although his seizures are observed by the other characters in a darker light. Smerdyakov’s seizures, on the other hand, reflect the view of epilepsy as a form of demonic possession; because he rejects the divine, Smerdyakov cannot experience even a fleeting moment of pure beauty. Seizures have long been associated with the demonic as well as the divine since, as Diane Thompson notes, epilepsy itself “was traditionally seen from two opposed sides, as a sacred illness and as demonic possession.” This view influenced the differing portrayals of epilepsy in Myshkin and Smerdyakov. Dostoevsky, who “was aware and affected by Russian folklore,” was familiar with portrayals of epilepsy in association with the holy fool as well as in demonic possession. He portrays the demonic aspect of these seizures in Smerdyakov.  

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36 Ibid., 57.
37 Thompson, 122.
38 Leatherbarrow, 2.
In the nineteenth century, Russian realist writers began to approach religious and moral problems in psychological terms. Leading up to Dostoevsky’s time, ancient themes of the devil and demonic possession became focused on questions of the “internalization” of evil. Dostoevsky reflects the idea that evil can be internalized in his portrayal of Smerdyakov, who behaves in a dark and inhumane manner. One example is Smerdyakov’s “demonic laughter,” which, as Adam Weiner writes, is a key characteristic of the demon, who in Russian literature displays “cold humor, irony, [and] sarcasm.” Smerdyakov is depicted as often “smirking” and inappropriately “grinning”; his dark mind leads him to behave abnormally.

Smerdyakov's epilepsy is the most dramatic aspect of this abnormality, of course; his monstrous and violent seizures further this impression of the devil within. Significantly, the onset of Smerdyakov's epilepsy is linked to his lack of faith at a young age. He questions the fundamental tenets of Christianity when he says to his adoptive father Grigory: “[I]f God created the world on the first day and the sun, the moon, and the stars only on the fourth day, where did the light come from on the first day?” Grigory, “horrified” at the boy's insolence, “los[es] all control and yells ‘This is where it came from!’” then “furiously” slaps him. Smerdyakov internalizes his response: “The boy took the slap without protest, and stayed in his corner for the next few days. And it so happened that a week after that he had his first fit of the falling sickness, an ailment that was to afflict him for the rest of his life.”

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39 Weiner, 50.
40 Ibid., 51.
41 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, 357: Smerdyakov grins at Ivan while talking of what might occur between Dmitry and Fyodor Karamazov; 809; Smeryakov grins “distrustfully” at Ivan when he first during their first interview while Smerdyakov is in the hospital; 823; Smerdyakov “smile[s] scornfully” after being accused of killing his father.
42 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, 163.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Building on this passage, Brian Johnson examines Smerdyakov's epilepsy as potentially redemptive. In his view, Smerdyakov is given the potential to be “sacred” through “the very designation of him as epileptic.” Johnson argues that the onset of Smerdyakov’s epilepsy is marked by Dostoevsky as “subsequent to and a consequence of the incident with Grigory when Smerdyakov challenges the story of Creation,” and thus the onset of his illness is given “a religious tinge.” By afflicting Smerdyakov with epilepsy, Dostoevsky provides the character with the choice to see and understand divine beauty, much like Myshkin. However, Smerdyakov chooses not to make it. Johnson refers to Dostoevsky’s comparison of Smerdyakov and the painting The Contemplator, where the painting’s unpredictable figure would “perhaps” “suddenly leave everything behind and go off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to seek salvation, or he might just as likely set fire to his own village, or possibly both.” In associating Smerdyakov with this figure, Dostoevsky emphasizes that Smerdyakov has a choice: toward Jerusalem in pursuit of the highest form of beauty, or violent and sensual pleasure.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Dmitry states that “what the head brands as shameful may appear as sheer beauty to the heart.” This fact is demonstrated in Smerdyakov’s sensual ideal of beauty that Dmitry (and Jackson) describes as the beauty in Sodom. Additionally, the seizure can be much more than what meets the eye. While onlookers view it to be demonic, the epileptic has the capacity to comprehend the purest form of beauty in it. Unlike Myshkin, though, Smerdyakov is not “lifted up to a third heaven by a higher power,” but instead “willfully chooses to fall into a basement with a sham attack.” This feigning of an attack is significant; it is clear that
Smerdyakov understands the grotesque bodily symptoms that occur during an attack and is able to recreate them in order to commit his crime. Smerdyakov falls into a real fit after murdering his father (after initially feigning one in order to kill him), and afterwards speaks to Ivan about how “there is no infinite God,” attesting to the fact that, despite all his experiences, he does not believe in the divine. The harmony, serenity, and understanding described by Dostoevsky and Myshkin are absent from Smerdyakov’s experience of seizure because of his lack of faith.

Smerdyakov’s journey in The Brothers Karamazov ends with his suicide, a final act of sin that condemns his brother Dmitry. Earlier in the text, Alyosha questions Ivan’s ability to live with the “hell in [his] heart” that is his lack of faith. He suggests that if Ivan continues on this way he will kill himself, “because [Ivan] won’t be able to stand it.” Perhaps it is the hell in Smerdyakov’s heart that causes him to commit suicide, or perhaps it is his wish to condemn his brother; but either way his rejection of the divine causes his demise.

Conclusion

The Idiot ends with Prince Myshkin caressing and soothing Rogozhin beside the corpse of Nastasya Filippovna, his idiocy rendered incurable. We can read this moment through the words of Father Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov: “Brothers, do not fear man’s sins. Love man in his sin too, for such love resembles God’s love, the highest possible form of love on earth.”

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50 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, 837: Smerdyakov tells Ivan: “Of course I was shamming it. I shammed everything. I went down those stairs with no trouble at all, to the very bottom, then I lay down, and once I was lying down I started to scream and yell and writhe until they carried me out of there”; 374: In the description of the shammed attack, Martha “heard him cry out. It was a very strange cry, quite unique, but familiar to her—it was the cry of an epileptic falling in a fit. […] When they reached him, he was already writhing on the cellar floor at the foot of the steps, his body twisted by convulsions, his mouth frothing.”

51 Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, 847.

52 Ibid., 350.

53 Ibid., 427.
emulates this presentation of love: the divine in action. He is able to love Rogozhin in his sin, and love the world, his heart growing “quite light” as his sanity is lifted away upon seeing the horrible scene before him. This sad picture is a representation of the inability of the holy fool to succeed in Russian society, which is filled with violent and monstrous types. As Dostoevsky wrote to his niece, all who have attempted to “depict what is positively good have always failed to do it” because “the task is an immeasurable one.” In this final scene, Dostoevsky demonstrates that it is nearly impossible for the positively good, the beautiful, to succeed in Russian society.

Myshkin is able to use his appreciation of the divine to look past the violent aspects of his seizures, whereas Smerdyakov lets the devil take the main place in his heart. Their respective narrative journeys are motivated by their contrasting ideals of beauty. Smerdyakov has the potential to view the same beauty of the pre-seizure moment as Dostoevsky and Myshkin, but, because he chooses not to believe in God, he is unable to perceive the harmony in it. Where Dostoevsky and Myshkin see all of man’s noblest ideals and aspirations in the instant before seizure, Smerdyakov is only able to see the “unhealthy form” of beauty, “the aesthetic element enter[ing] man’s being as a destructive force.” He may only comprehend the monstrous, grotesque form of the seizure as it disfigures his body and senses. These differences in Smerdyakov and Myshkin's epilepsies reflect how “categories and models [...] sometimes overlap and mirror each other” across Dostoevsky's œuvre. As Harriet Murav explains, these category shifts demonstrate that “Dostoevsky’s works are situated in an historic context of change and transition.”

54 Cited in Heller and Volkova, 153.
55 Jackson, 42.
56 Murav, 15.
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