

## **Kierkegaard's Epilepsy**

### *"The Intriguing Secret of the Machinery"*

"After my death no one will find in my papers the slightest information (this is my consolation) about what really has filled my life; no one will find the inscription in my innermost being that interprets everything and that often turns into events of prodigious importance to me that which the world would call bagatelles and which I regard as insignificant if I remove the secret note that interprets them," Kierkegaard noted in his journal.

With the addition of "the secret note" what is only "insignificant" from one point of view becomes "events of prodigious significance" for Kierkegaard. He was quite aware of this and expressed himself as follows: ". . . And this is why the time will come when not only my writings but my whole life, the intriguing secret of the whole machinery, will be studied and studied." Kierkegaard's writings became clear to me when I read them in the light of his life--"the intriguing secret of the machinery."

Kierkegaard himself said, "Of all sufferings there is perhaps none so martyring as to become an object of pity, nothing which so tempts one to rebel against God. People usually regard such a person as stupid and shallow, but it would not be difficult to show that precisely this is the hidden secret in the lives of many of the most eminent world-historical figures." There can be no doubt that Kierkegaard here had himself in mind.

*Kierkegaard in the Physician's Office*

Kierkegaard regarded his work as an author as concluded with the publication of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in February 1846. Things would turn out differently, however. After having finished *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard consulted his physician. In a journal entry from 1846 Kierkegaard explained that he viewed it as "a man's duty not to bypass the court which is available in talking things over with another person, just so this does not become a frivolous confidence but is an earnest and official communication." In his 1846 journal entry he was referring to a visit to a physician that had taken place. This consultation became a turning point in Kierkegaard's life. "From that moment I made my choice," he wrote. At the crossroads of his visit to his doctor, Kierkegaard chose to continue his career as an author. In 1846 he wrote about his visit to his doctor under the heading: "*The Way I have Understood Myself in all My Literary Work.*"

Kierkegaard prefaced his journal entry by proclaiming, "I am in the profoundest sense an unhappy individuality, riveted from the beginning to one or another suffering bordering on madness, a suffering which must have its deeper basis in a misrelation between my mind and my body, for (and this is the remarkable thing as well as my infinite encouragement) it has no relation to my spirit, which on the contrary, because of the tension between mind and body, has perhaps gained an uncommon resiliency." Kierkegaard viewed this misrelation between mind and body as "the most tormenting one of all, where the psychic and the somatic dialectically touch each other." But it did not damage his spiritual gifts. On the contrary, Kierkegaard insisted that "because of the tension between mind and body, [my spirit] has perhaps gained an uncommon resiliency."

Even though Kierkegaard was not much for sharing confidences, he saw it as his duty to seek advice from another person. "I therefore asked my physician whether he believed that the structural misrelation between the physical and the psychical could be dispelled so that I could realize the universal [by getting married]. This he doubted. I asked him whether he thought that my spirit could convert or transform this misrelation by willing it. He doubted it; he would not even advise me to set in motion all the powers by my will, of which he had some conception, since I could blow up everything. From that moment I made my choice," he wrote in his journal. Kierkegaard therefore concluded: "I have regarded that tragic misrelation, together with my sufferings . . . as my thorn in the flesh, my limitation, my cross; I have looked upon it as the high price at which God in heaven sold me a mental-spiritual capacity unequalled among my contemporaries."

It was in discussing his visit to the doctor that Kierkegaard first employed the expression "the thorn in the flesh" to describe his secret suffering. Kierkegaard was very much aware of the presumptuousness of using the apostle Paul's expression to describe his own suffering. For Kierkegaard there was a qualitative difference between an apostle, who has been directly called by a revelation from God, and the sort of election he connected with his own suffering.

In his edifying discourse from 1844 that deals with the apostle Paul's expression "the thorn in the flesh," Kierkegaard declared: "And appalling, indeed, just as deadly, the expression [the thorn in the flesh] really is, inasmuch as it testifies to the deep pain that is the contrast and successor to what is more glorious than any earthly happiness, than the most glorious conception of any merely human thought, the contrast to the supreme blessedness, such as it is experienced when it is inexpressible." Kierkegaard differentiated between the ecstasy in which the apostle was transported to the third heaven--the sublime

revelation, the ineffable bliss--and the joy of the Gospel, which the apostle shares with others: "this expression--to be caught up into the third heaven, to be made a participant in sublime revelations, to sense an inexpressible beatitude--this he cannot use and has not used to describe the beautiful joy he shared with others. But that inexpressible beatitude he could not express--alas, and to prevent it, he was given a thorn in the flesh."

The apostle had been given a thorn in the flesh precisely in order to prevent him from being proud of his ecstasy and of having been transported to the third heaven, to prevent him from speaking of the ineffable bliss to be found there. The bliss and the suffering correspond to one another in this fashion: "The thorn in the flesh, then, is the contrast to the spirit's inexpressible beatitude," Kierkegaard explained in more detail: "As soon as the suffering is perceived and the thorn festers, the apostle has only himself to deal with. The beatitude has vanished, vanishes more and more--alas, it was inexpressible to have it; the pain is inexpressible since it cannot even express the loss, and recollection is unable to do anything but languish in powerlessness." Referring to this terrible shift from one extreme to another, Kierkegaard exclaimed, "To have been caught up into the third heaven, to have been hidden in the bosom of beatitude, to have been expanded in God, and now to be tethered by the thorn in the flesh to the thralldom of temporality! To have been made rich in God, inexpressibly so, and now to be broken down to flesh and blood, to dust and corruption! To have been himself present before God and now to be forsaken by God, forsaken by himself, comforted only by a poor, demented recollection!"

By chance, by a combination of psychiatry and theology, we came upon the trail of Kierkegaard's carefully concealed secret suffering, inasmuch as my wife, Heidi Hansen, is a psychiatrist and I myself am a theologian.

In 1974 the American neurologists Waxmann and Geschwind published an article that described the occurrence of the phenomenon of hypergraphia, an excessive compulsion to write, in certain patients with temporal lobe epilepsy. The following year, based on their own and others' observations, they described a specific behavioral syndrome that could occur in patients with temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). In 1979 Geschwind described the TLE syndrome as follows: Heightened interest in philosophical, moral, or religious questions, often in striking contrast to the patient's educational background, an increase in religious conversion (or an obstinate insistence upon the absence of religious feeling), hypergraphia (a tendency to write in extraordinarily detailed fashion, often on religious or philosophical subjects), hyposexuality (reduced sex drive, sometimes changes in sexual behavior), and varying degrees of irritability.

In 1984 a scientific investigation was undertaken at the National Hospital in Copenhagen in order to see whether and to what extent interictal personality changes--i.e., changes which persist in the intervals between epileptic attacks--such as those described by the American researchers Waxmann and Geschwind (and subsequently Bear and Fedio) could be detected among patients with temporal lobe epilepsy.

A questionnaire was devised to be answered by the patient and by a person closely connected to the patient in order to investigate whether this TLE syndrome could be detected in the TLE patients who were affiliated with the epilepsy outpatient unit at the National Hospital. The questionnaire dealt with the character traits or symptoms mentioned above: compulsive writing, heightened interest in religious or philosophical subjects, the experience of having had a

divine call, the experience of having had a revelation, prolixity, viscosity (i.e., a tenacious or "sticky" state of mind), perseveration, and irritability.

*Kierkegaard's The Book on Adler*

When I helped formulate the wording of the questionnaire it struck me that Kierkegaard had long ago described the personality traits that comprised the TLE syndrome. The description is specifically to be found in *The Book on Adler*, no fewer than four versions of which are among Kierkegaard's posthumous papers. Of all his contemporaries, it was Adler with whom Kierkegaard most concerned himself. But he did so privately. Kierkegaard never published the book, though as late as 1855, the year of his death, he was still writing about Adler in his journal. In the preface to his translation of *The Book on Adler*, the American Kierkegaard scholar Walter Lowrie wrote, "Perhaps the fact that it reveals his intimate thoughts so clearly was one of the reasons which made him reluctant to publish it during his lifetime."

Adolph Peter Adler was born in 1812 and studied theology at the University of Copenhagen contemporaneously with Kierkegaard. He studied Hegel, and in 1840 he defended his dissertation "The Principal Forms of the Isolated Subjectivity." He broke off his university career in order to become a parish pastor in Hasle-Rutsker on the island of Bornholm. In the summer of 1843 Adler published *Some Sermons*. In the preface, dated June 18, 1843, Adler reported that he had had a revelation.

Kierkegaard had his own explanation of Magister Adler's revelation. Kierkegaard wrote of "making his monologue into a dialogue--that is, to speak oneself in such a manner that this self becomes a second being who has a

consistency outside oneself--that is, to redouble oneself. One can fictively go further along this path and have a fictive second person with whom one speaks." According to Kierkegaard, in December 1842 Adler had been ensnared in a "self-redoubling"--to speak with oneself such that this self has a consistency outside oneself. In his book *Consciousness and Psychosis*, the Danish psychiatrist Ralf Hemmingsen describes the phenomenon of the doppelgänger as an "externalized inner dialogue." Such dissociative phenomena can occur in patients with temporal lobe epilepsy.

In his first manuscript draft of *The Book on Adler* Kierkegaard drew a parallel between Magister Adler and the Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg: "Thus in his [Adler's] first sermons, one will find statements that are extremely similar to the ideas of . . . Swedenborg, etc. And yet in this case there can be no doubt that he has not read the least bit of this sort of thing." In *The Psychoses of Epilepsy*, the English psychiatrist Michael R. Trimble refers to the physician H. Maudsley, who mentioned "the development of an exaggerated sentiment, visual hallucinations, and like Swedenborg, they [the epileptics] are sometimes carried up into heaven while yet in the flesh, and have conferences with the Supreme."

Pastor Frederik Helveg, a contemporary of Kierkegaard and Adler, wrote the following with respect to Adler's prophetic call: "He has seen nothing, but, through his senses (namely, the olfactory sense) and especially his hearing, he received a definite impression, arose from his bed (the revelation took place at night) and then, right on the spot and in accordance with what was dictated to him, he wrote down the words that constitute the contents of the revelation." Thus Frederik Helveg mentioned Magister Adler's olfactory experiences in connection with his revelation. In this connection we can refer to the results of Hughlings Jackson's research during the last two decades of the nineteenth

century into "uncinate fits." The type of epilepsy Hughlings Jackson described, "uncinate epilepsy," is today known as temporal lobe epilepsy or limbic epilepsy.

Right in the introduction to the first version of *The Book on Adler* Kierkegaard focused on Adler's uncontrollable compulsion to write. Kierkegaard made general remarks on the nature of a "premise author," namely one who is satisfied with reporting premises, but no conclusions. And with respect to one such author Kierkegaard wrote: "No, although he writes, he is not essentially an author." It is a case of literary production for the sake of literary production: "The premise-author has no need to *communicate himself*, because essentially he has nothing to communicate; indeed, he lacks precisely the essential, the conclusion, the meaning in relation to the presuppositions. He has no *need to communicate* himself; he is *one who is in need*"

#### *Kierkegaardian Splits*

We maintain that Kierkegaard's intense preoccupation with Magister Adler is a clue that leads to Kierkegaard's own secret. When Kierkegaard arrived at his explanation of Adler's revelation as a "self-redoubling," he was apparently familiar with similar dissociative conditions from his own experience. It is worth noting that in reading the Swabian physician, researcher, and writer Justinus Kerner (1786-1862), Kierkegaard encountered some traits he knew from his own experience. Thus in a journal entry from July 1837 Kierkegaard wrote: "I cannot help being amazed that Justinus Kerner (in his *Dichtungen*) is able to interpret so conciliatingly the phenomenon which has always shocked me since my very first experience of it--that someone says just exactly what I say. To me the phenomenon seemed to be the most confusing, almost Punch-and-Judy, disorder: the one would begin a sentence which the other would finish, and no



one could be sure who was speaking." Justinus Kerner had himself seen the phenomena of such splits in connection with epilepsy. In his comprehensive work on the physician, researcher, writer, and seer Justinus Kerner, Otto-Joachim Grüsser, a professor of physiology in the field of experimental research on the brain, has linked to epilepsy--more specifically to temporal lobe epilepsy--the "possessed" dissociative states described by Justinus Kerner.

### *Kierkegaard's Hypergraphia*

Kierkegaard has described how he himself was in the grip of an irresistible compulsion to write. "Again, this is something I have to be especially on guard against, for once I get a pen in my hand and some blank paper, then there is a risk that I will go on and on," he wrote to his nephew Henrik Lund.

And with reference to the last of the tales in the *Thousand and One Nights* Kierkegaard remarked that "as Scheherezade saved her life by telling stories, I save my life or keep alive by being productive." Nowhere did Kierkegaard give as clear an account of his uncontrollable, irresistible compulsion to write as in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, specifically in the third chapter, which has the remarkable heading "Governance's Part in My Authorship." Here he states "It seems to me that if I had a winged pen, indeed, ten of them, I still would be unable to keep up with the abundance offered to me." Thus Kierkegaard imagined the possibility of writing with ten winged pens at once. But just as he would be about to begin, something would intervene to stop him: "When I pick up my pen, for a time I cannot--just as one speaks of not being able to move a foot--move my pen; in that state not a line about this relationship is put down on paper. I seem to hear a voice that says to me: Obtuse fellow, what does he

think he is; does he not know that obedience is dearer to God than the fat of rams? Do the whole thing as a work assignment. Then I become completely calm; then there is time to write every letter, almost meticulously, with my slower pen." Kierkegaard thus had to be restrained from the all-engulfing passion to write: "I seem to hear a voice speak to me as a teacher speaks to a boy: Now just hold the pen properly and write each letter exactly. Then I can do it, then I dare not do anything else, then I write each word, each line, almost unaware of the next word and the next line. Then, when I read it through later, I find an entirely different satisfaction in it. Even though some glowing expressions perhaps did elude me, what has been produced is something else--it is not the work of the poetic passion or the thinker passion, but of devotion to God, and for me a divine worship." Kierkegaard had been forced to obey.

In a journal entry Kierkegaard explained about the pressure under which he wrote: "One thought succeeds another; just as it is thought and I want to write it down, there is a new one--hold it, seize it--madness--dementia!" Kierkegaard was in a situation that was the opposite of that in which writers usually find themselves: "'The poet' is said to call upon the muse in order to get ideas. This has actually never been the case for me; my individuality debar me from even understanding it. But on the other hand, I have needed God every day to defend myself against the abundance of thoughts. Indeed, give a person a creative talent like that, and then such a frail health, and he surely will learn to pray. At every moment I have been and am still able to perform the feat of sitting down and writing incessantly day and night and yet another day and night, because there is wealth enough. But if I did that, I would collapse. Ah, just the slightest dietary indiscretion, and I am in mortal danger." Therefore it was important to hold onto the pen properly and to write "every letter carefully" without being carried away. Kierkegaard remarks, "There has not been the slightest delay in

the writing. . . . In one sense all the writing has had an unbroken evenness, as if I had done nothing other than to copy each day a specific part of a printed book." Two Kierkegaard scholars, a Dane, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, and a Canadian, Alastair McKinnon, have demonstrated statistically that Kierkegaard produced uninterruptedly, and in this connection the two scholars describe Kierkegaard as "essentially (and perhaps compulsively) a writer."

During the whole of his literary productivity Kierkegaard "incessantly needed God's assistance in order to be able to do it as a simple work assignment for which specific hours are allotted each day, beyond which it was not permitted to work, and when this happened on rare occasions, I had to pay dearly for it. Nothing resembles my conduct less than that outburst of genius and then a tumultuous breaking off. I have basically lived like a scribe in his office. >From the very beginning I have been as if under arrest and at every moment sensed that it was not I who played the master." If Kierkegaard did not know from his own experience how wrong things could go, he was in any case terrified by the clues he gleaned from Magister Adler.

Kierkegaard's general understanding of the dialectical nature of the extraordinary gift that had been entrusted to him was as follows: If he did not obey, it would kill him. "It was like a father's saying to a child, 'You have permission to receive it all at once, it is yours, but if you refuse to obey and use it as I want you to use it--well, I will not punish you by taking it away--no, take it, it will crush you.' Without God I am too strong for myself, and in perhaps the most agonizing way of all I am shattered."

There are parallels between the Danish poet-philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the Russian author Feodor Dostoyevsky which have not as yet attracted attention. In his writings Dostoyevsky has characters report on epileptic experiences of bliss. In *Repetition* (1843) Kierkegaard had Constantin Constantius' report on a similar experience of bliss, and in so doing he stretches language to the limit: "Precisely at one o'clock I was at the highest peak and surmised the dizzy maximum which is not indicated on any scale of well-being, not even on the poetical thermometer. The body had lost all its earthly heaviness, it was as though I had no body, just for the reason that every function enjoyed its completest satisfaction, every nerve tingled with delight on its account and on account of the whole, while every pulsation, as a disquietude in the organism, only suggested and reported the sensuous delight of the instant. My gait became a glide, not like the flight of the bird that cleaves the air and leaves the earth behind, but like the billows of the wind over a field of grain, like the yearning bliss of the cradling waves of the sea, like the dreamy gliding of the clouds. My very being was transparent, like the depths of the sea, like the self-contented silence of the night, like the quite monologue of midday. Every feeling of my soul composed itself to rest with melodious resonance. Every thought proffered itself freely, every thought proffered itself with festal gladness and solemnity, the silliest conceit not less than the richest idea. Every impression was surmised before it arrived and was awakened within me. The whole of existence seemed to be as it were in love with me, and everything vibrated in preordained *rapport* with my being. In me all was ominous, and everything was enigmatically transfigured in my microcosmic bliss. . . . When precisely at one o'clock I was at the highest peak, where I surmised the ultimate attainment, something suddenly began to chafe one of my eyes, whether it was an eye-lash, a mote, a bit of dust, I do not know; but this I know, that in that selfsame instant I

topped down almost into the abyss of despair."

In this context we should also cite Kierkegaard's famous journal entry from 1838. The time is noted very precisely: "There is an *indescribable joy* that glows all through us just as inexplicably as the apostle's exclamation breaks forth for no apparent reason: 'Rejoice, and again I say, Rejoice.' -- Not a joy over this or that, but the soul's full outcry 'with tongue and mouth and from the bottom of the heart': 'I rejoice for my joy, by, in, with, about, over, for, and with my joy -- a heavenly refrain which, as it were, suddenly interrupts our other singing, a joy which cools and refreshes like a breath of air, a breeze from the trade winds which blow across the plains of Mamre to the everlasting mansions.

May 19, 10:30 A.M."

#### *Descriptions of Episodes*

Pastor Tycho E. Spang, whose parents Kierkegaard regularly visited, reported the following with respect to Kierkegaard: "We were told that he often had powerful attacks from his ailments when he was with Giørdwad, so that he would fall to the floor, but he fought the pain with clenched hands and tensed muscles, then took up the broken thread of the conversation again, and often said, 'Don't tell about this. What use is it for people to know about what I must bear?'"

Tycho E. Spang uses the word "often." To judge from the description, this could have been an epileptic attack. Thus, referring to a "minor attack" of epilepsy (*petit mal*) the English neurologist Kinnier Wilson remarks: "In most attacks the return to full awareness is as immediate as its loss is sudden; the thread of conversation is resumed, the activity of the moment is continued, without a falter."

Kierkegaard's secretary, the philologist Israel Levin, reported the following with respect to Kierkegaard: "The last evening, it had been at Cand. Giødwad's, he sat on the sofa and had been so merry, playful, and charming. Then he fell down off the sofa, and we helped him up. 'Ohh, lemme l-l-l-lie here till the girl sweeps up in the mornin', he stammered, but fainted shortly thereafter." Only one single time in all of his writings did Kierkegaard mention the word "epilepsy." It was in connection with epileptic speech disturbances: "as when the tongue of an epileptic pronounces the wrong word."

*Kierkegaard's Words of Farewell at the Hospital*

Kierkegaard's friend Emil Boesen visited him at the end when he was a patient at Frederik's Hospital. He asked whether there was anything else Kierkegaard wanted to have said. At first Kierkegaard answered No. Then he said, "Yes, greet everyone for me, I have liked them all very much, and tell them that my life is a great suffering, unknown and inexplicable to other people. Everything looked like pride and vanity, but it wasn't. I am absolutely no better than other people, and I have said so and have never said anything else. I have had my thorn in the flesh, and therefore I did not marry and could not accept an official [ecclesiastical] position. . . . But I became the exception instead."

Professor F. C. Sibbern, the father of Danish psychology, was close to Søren Kierkegaard. He wrote the following to his daughter with respect to Kierkegaard, "People said he died paralyzed in his lower body, no doubt of epilepsy. But epilepsy can put the soul in a very exalted state." Professor Sibbern can scarcely have been correct in stating that the final paralysis of Kierkegaard's lower body was attributable to epilepsy, but he may have known that Kierkegaard suffered from epilepsy.

The illness which Kierkegaard kept secret was thus the explanation of why he never married Regine but instead broke the engagement, and of why he was also unable to seek appointment as a pastor.

*The Correspondence Between Suffering and Genius*

Kierkegaard wrote the following journal entry in describing his suffering: "A life which was a burden to me however much I knew at times all the happy strains but which was all embittered by the black spot which spoiled everything, a life which, if others knew its secret, I perceived would make me an object of pity and sympathy from the very outset of my life." This was exactly how epilepsy patients were looked upon in Kierkegaard's day. The laws of those times put the illness on the same level as leprosy and syphilis. In his *Handbook of Therapy*, Søren Kierkegaard's physician, Oluf Bang, wrote the following with regard to epilepsy and marriage: "Marriage must be discouraged, partly out of concern for the offspring." It should also be noted that Oluf Bang added that "it is most likely a matter of chance that many world-famous men have been epileptics." Kierkegaard regarded his suffering as inseparable from his genius. In this connection he wrote in a journal entry, "If my suffering, my frailty, were not the condition for my intellectual work, then of course I would still make an attempt to deal with it by an ordinary medical approach. There is just no point in suffering as I suffer and not do a thing about it if one's life has no significance anyway. But here is the secret: the significance of my life corresponds directly to my suffering."