Did Goethe Describe Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?

Sara Bonazza Cesa Scaglione Massimo Poppi Giovanni Rizzo

Department of Neurological Sciences, Bologna University, Bologna, Italy

Key Words

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder • Goethe • Euphorion

Abstract

As early as 1846, the typical symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were described by Heinrich Hoffmann (1809–1894). However, in Goethe's masterpiece *Faust* (1832), the character of Euphorion strongly suggests ADHD diagnosis.

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Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a worldwide known neurobehavioral condition defined by DSM-IV as inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity in children or adolescents.

ADHD has three subtypes: predominantly hyperactive-impulsive, predominantly inattentive, and the combined type [1].

In recent years, functional neuroimaging, genetic and pharmacological studies suggested that the pathophysiology of ADHD, classically considered a multifactorial disorder, would be conditioned by a dysfunction in the frontostriatal pathways, as well as imbalances in the dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems. Prefrontal cortex, a regulator of attention, behavior, and emotion, which is highly dependent on the correct neurochemical environment for proper function, is underactive and weakly connected in ADHD patients [2].

ADHD was first described by Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann (1809–1894) in 1846 in a children's book – *Struwwelpeter* (*Straw Peter* in the English literature) – written for his son, in which an inattentive and hyperactive boy, Fidgety Philip, exhibited a persistent pattern of unrestrained excessive motor activity with disastrous consequences [3–5]. For this reason, it has also been suggested that the eponym Fidgety Philip syndrome would be more appropriate than *Struwwelpeter* (the title of the whole book which includes a lot of different problems of child development and misbehavior) to refer to ADHD [6].

In 1902, Sir George F. Still described a group of children with impulsive behavior in the *Lancet* [7].

In the second part of his masterpiece *Faust* (1832), the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) depicted a very peculiar character of a boy in act 3 scene 2B. Born by the union of Dr. Faust with Helen (of Troy), Euphorion incessantly bounces from mother to father, caressing, flattering, singing cheerful songs, jumping from rock to rock and from rock to air [8].

To the repeated and unattended warnings of his parents to be careful, Euphorion states that his true joy is to be let free to jump and leap into the ether (9712–9714) without restraint, since 'What is mine is mine' (9728). Faust and Helen again try to 'curb this energy, to check this ardour' (9739–9740). Suddenly, Euphorion stops jumping and starts to dance with the Chorus maidens, but immediately announces he will transform the dance into a hunting game. Caressing, embracing and kissing a reluctant maiden, Euphorion says 'if she resists a kiss, show my strength and will like this' (9799); then, while the girl

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Giovanni Rizzo
Dipartimento di Scienze Neurologiche, Università di Bologna
Via U. Foscolo 7
IT-40123 Bologna (Italy)
Tel. +39 051 209 2950, Fax +39 051 209 2958, E-Mail g.rizzo@unibo.it

Fig. 1. Wilhelm von Kaulbach's (1805–1874) artist postcard No. 1283: *Faust und Helen*. Note their son Euphorion represented as an allegory of poetry. From Art Experts Website (<http://www.artexpertswebsite.com>).

vanishes in a fire, he begins to bounce higher and higher among the rocks 'to seeing further, seeing all' (9822).

Now Euphorion, flying in the air, is dressed like an ancient warrior with a lightened cuirass and announces he wants to fight for freedom in a dangerous glory destiny.

One moment, he is in the air with an intense accompanying light, the next he falls dead at his parent's feet. Hyperactivity was the dominant trait in Euphorion's behavior, showing a persistent pattern of excessive motor activity, constantly coupled with an impulsive motivation, without any attention to his parents' reprimands or ominous consequences.

Moreover, it is conceivable that the name Euphorion (from the Greek *eu* = well, and *phorein* = feel), which means euphoria, i.e. exuberant gaiety, elation, was not chosen by chance to define this character. A combined type of ADHD is readily evoked both by the name and behavior.

In addition, it is of some interest that the character of Euphorion has been constantly interpreted by critics since the XIX century as a metaphoric portrait of the famous English poet Lord George Gordon Byron (1788–1824) [9], whose restless life and personality have undergone psychological evaluation, with a presumptive diagnosis of ADHD [10]. In this regard, figure 1 shows a postcard of the artist Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874) in which Euphorion is represented as an allegory of poetry.

In conclusion, it seems highly probable that the first description of ADHD, possibly triggered by some real life observation, comes from the poetic genius of a great mind anticipating medical attention to this condition by several decades.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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