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**Illness as
Metaphor**



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Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

I want to describe, not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character. My subject is not physical illness itself but the uses of illness as a figure or metaphor. My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking. Yet it is hardly pos-

sible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped. It is toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them, that I dedicate this inquiry.

tract the disease. Doctors and laity believed in a TB character type—as now the belief in a cancer-prone character type, far from being confined to the back yard of folk superstition, passes for the most advanced medical thinking. In contrast to the modern bogey of the cancer-prone character—someone unemotional, inhibited, repressed—the TB-prone character that haunted imaginations in the nineteenth century was an amalgam of two different fantasies: someone both passionate and repressed.

That other notorious scourge among nineteenth-century diseases, syphilis, was at least not mysterious. Contracting syphilis was a predictable consequence, the consequence, usually, of having sex with a carrier of the disease. So, among all the guilt-embroidered fantasies about sexual pollution attached to syphilis, there was no place for a type of personality supposed to be especially susceptible to the disease (as was once imagined for TB and is now for cancer). The syphilitic personality type was someone who had the disease (Osvald in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Adrian Leverkühn in *Doctor Faustus*), not someone who was likely to get it. In its role as scourge, syphilis implied a moral judgment (about off-limits sex, about prostitution) but not a psychological one. TB, once so mysterious—as cancer is now—suggested judgments of a deeper kind, both moral and psychological, about the ill.

[BEGIN READING HERE].

The speculations of the ancient world made disease most often an instrument of divine wrath. Judgment

was meted out either to a community (the plague in Book I of the *Iliad* that Apollo inflicts on the Achaeans in punishment for Agamemnon's abduction of Chryses' daughter; the plague in *Oedipus* that strikes Thebes because of the polluting presence of the royal sinner) or to a single person (the stinking wound in Philoctetes' foot). The diseases around which the modern fantasies have gathered—TB, cancer—are viewed as forms of self-judgment, of self-betrayal.

One's mind betrays one's body. "My head and lungs have come to an agreement without my knowledge," Kafka said about his TB in a letter to Max Brod in September 1917. Or one's body betrays one's feelings, as in Mann's late novel *The Black Swan*, whose aging heroine, youthfully in love with a young man, takes as the return of her menses what is actually a hemorrhage and the symptom of incurable cancer. The body's treachery is thought to have its own inner logic. Freud was "very beautiful . . . when he spoke," Wilhelm Reich reminisced. "Then it hit him just here, in the mouth. And that is where my interest in cancer began." That interest led Reich to propose his version of the link between a mortal disease and the character of those it humiliates.

In the pre-modern view of disease, the role of character was confined to one's behavior after its onset. Like any extreme situation, dreaded illnesses bring out both people's worst and best. The standard accounts of epidemics, however, are mainly of the devastating effect of disease upon character. The weaker the

chronicler's preconception of disease as a punishment for wickedness, the more likely that the account will stress the moral corruption made manifest by the disease's spread. Even if the disease is not thought to be a judgment on the community, it becomes one—retroactively—as it sets in motion an inexorable collapse of morals and manners. Thucydides relates the ways in which the plague that broke out in Athens in 430 B.C. spawned disorder and lawlessness (“The pleasure of the moment took the place both of honor and expedience”) and corrupted language itself. And the whole point of Boccaccio's description in the first pages of the *Decameron* of the great plague of 1348 is how badly the citizens of Florence behaved.

In contrast to this disdainful knowledge of how most loyalties and loves shatter in the panic produced by epidemic disease, the accounts of modern diseases—where the judgment tends to fall on the individual rather than the society—seem exaggeratedly unaware of how poorly many people take the news that they are dying. Fatal illness has always been viewed as a test of moral character, but in the nineteenth century there is a great reluctance to let anybody flunk the test. And the virtuous only become more so as they slide toward death. This is standard achievement for TB deaths in fiction, and goes with the inveterate spiritualizing of TB and the sentimentalizing of its horrors. Tuberculosis provided a redemptive death for the fallen, like the young prostitute Fantine in *Les Misérables*, or a sacrificial death for the virtuous, like the heroine of

Selma Lagerlöf's *The Phantom Chariot*. Even the ultra-virtuous, when dying of this disease, boost themselves to new moral heights. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Little Eva during her last days urges her father to become a serious Christian and free his slaves. *The Wings of the Dove*: after learning that her suitor is a fortune hunter, Milly Theale wills her fortune to him and dies. *Dombey and Son*: "From some hidden reason, very imperfectly understood by himself—if understood at all—[Paul] felt a gradually increasing impulse of affection, towards almost everything and everybody in the place."

For those characters treated less sentimentally, the disease is viewed as the occasion finally to behave well. At the least, the calamity of disease can clear the way for insight into lifelong self-deceptions and failures of character. The lies that muffle Ivan Ilyich's drawn-out agony—his cancer being unmentionable to his wife and children—reveal to him the lie of his whole life; when dying, he is, for the first time, in a state of truth. The sixty-year-old civil servant in Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* (1952) quits his job after learning he has terminal stomach cancer and, taking up the cause of a slum neighborhood, fights the bureaucracy he had served. With one year left to live, Watanabe wants to do something that is worthwhile, wants to redeem his mediocre life.