that every illness can be considered psychologically. Illness is interpreted as, basically, a psychological event, and people are encouraged to believe that they get sick because they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will; that they can choose not to die of the disease. These two hypotheses are complementary. As the first seems to relieve guilt, the second reinstates it. Psychological theories of illness are a powerful means of placing the blame on the ill. Patients who are instructed that they have, unwittingly, caused their disease are also being made to feel that they have deserved it.

8

Punitive notions of disease have a long history, and such notions are particularly active with cancer. There is the “fight” or “crusade” against cancer; cancer is the “killer” disease; people who have cancer are “cancer victims.” Ostensibly, the illness is the culprit. But it is also the cancer patient who is made culpable. Widely believed psychological theories of disease assign to the luckless ill the ultimate responsibility both for falling ill and for getting well. And conventions of treating cancer as no mere disease but a demonic enemy make cancer not just a lethal disease but a shameful one.
Leprosy in its heyday aroused a similarly disproportionate sense of horror. In the Middle Ages, the leper was a social text in which corruption was made visible; an exemplum, an emblem of decay. Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one. Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. In French, a moldering stone façade is still lépreuse.

Epidemic diseases were a common figure for social disorder. From pestilence (bubonic plague) came “pestilent,” whose figurative meaning, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “injurious to religion, morals, or public peace—1513”; and “pestilentia,” meaning “morally baneful or pernicious—1531.” Feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world.

In the past, such grandiloquent fantasies were regularly attached to the epidemic diseases, diseases that were a collective calamity. In the last two centuries,
the diseases most often used as metaphors for evil were syphilis, tuberculosis, and cancer—all diseases imagined to be, preeminently, the diseases of individuals.

Syphilis was thought to be not only a horrible disease but a demeaning, vulgar one. Anti-democrats used it to evoke the desecrations of an egalitarian age. Baudelaire, in a note for his never completed book on Belgium, wrote:

We all have the republican spirit in our veins, like syphilis in our bones—we are democratized and venerealized.

In the sense of an infection that corrupts morally and debilitates physically, syphilis was to become a standard trope in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anti-Semitic polemics. In 1933 Wilhelm Reich argued that “the irrational fear of syphilis was one of the major sources of National Socialism’s political views and its anti-Semitism.” But although he perceived sexual and political phobias being projected onto a disease in the grisly harping on syphilis in Mein Kampf, it never occurred to Reich how much was being projected in his own persistent use of cancer as a metaphor for the ills of the modern era. Indeed, cancer can be stretched much further than syphilis can as a metaphor.

Syphilis was limited as a metaphor because the disease itself was not regarded as mysterious; only awful. A tainted heredity (Ibsen’s Ghosts), the perils
of sex (Charles-Louis Philippe’s *Bubu de Montparnasse*, Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*)—there was horror aplenty in syphilis. But no mystery. Its causality was clear, and understood to be singular. Syphilis was the grimmest of gifts, “transmitted” or “carried” by a sometimes ignorant sender to the unsuspecting receiver. In contrast, TB was regarded as a mysterious affliction, and a disease with myriad causes—just as today, while everyone acknowledges cancer to be an unsolved riddle, it is also generally agreed that cancer is multi-determined. A variety of factors—such as cancer-causing substances (“carcinogens”) in the environment, genetic makeup, lowering of immuno-defenses (by previous illness or emotional trauma), characterological predisposition—are held responsible for the disease. And many researchers assert that cancer is not one but more than a hundred clinically distinct diseases, that each cancer has to be studied separately, and that what will eventually be developed is an array of cures, one for each of the different cancers.

The resemblance of current ideas about cancer’s myriad causes to long-held but now discredited views about TB suggests the possibility that cancer may be one disease after all and that it may turn out, as TB did, to have a principal causal agent and be controllable by one program of treatment. Indeed, as Lewis Thomas has observed, all the diseases for which the issue of causation has been settled, and which can be prevented and cured, have turned out to have a simple
physical cause—like the pneumococcus for pneumonia, the tubercle bacillus for tuberculosis, a single vitamin deficiency for pellagra—and it is far from unlikely that something comparable will eventually be isolated for cancer. The notion that a disease can be explained only by a variety of causes is precisely characteristic of thinking about diseases whose causation is not understood. And it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong.

TB and cancer have been used to express not only (like syphilis) crude fantasies about contamination but also fairly complex feelings about strength and weakness, and about energy. For more than a century and a half, tuberculosis provided a metaphoric equivalent for delicacy, sensitivity, sadness, powerlessness; while whatever seemed ruthless, implacable, predatory, could be analogized to cancer. (Thus, Baudelaire in 1852, in his essay "L’Ecole païenne," observed: "A frenzied passion for art is a canker that devours the rest. . . .") TB was an ambivalent metaphor, both a scourge and an emblem of refinement. Cancer was never viewed other than as a scourge; it was, metaphorically, the barbarian within.

While syphilis was thought to be passively incurred, an entirely involuntary disaster, TB was once, and cancer is now, thought to be a pathology of energy, a
disease of the will. Concern about energy and feeling, fears about the havoc they wreak, have been attached to both diseases. Getting TB was thought to signify a defective vitality, or vitality misspent. "There was a great want of vital power . . . and great constitutional weakness"—so Dickens described little Paul in *Dombey and Son*. The Victorian idea of TB as a disease of low energy (and heightened sensitivity) has its exact complement in the Reichian idea of cancer as a disease of unexpressed energy (and anesthetized feelings). In an era in which there seemed to be no inhibitions on being productive, people were anxious about not having enough energy. In our own era of destructive overproduction by the economy and of increasing bureaucratic restraints on the individual, there is both a fear of having too much energy and an anxiety about energy not being allowed to be expressed.

Like Freud's scarcity-economics theory of "instincts," the fantasies about TB which arose in the last century (and lasted well into ours) echo the attitudes of early capitalist accumulation. One has a limited amount of energy, which must be properly spent. (Having an orgasm, in nineteenth-century English slang, was not "coming" but "spending.") Energy, like savings, can be depleted, can run out or be used up, through reckless expenditure. The body will start "consuming" itself, the patient will "waste away."

The language used to describe cancer evokes a different economic catastrophe: that of unregulated, abnormal, incoherent growth. The tumor has energy,
not the patient; "it" is out of control. Cancer cells, according to the textbook account, are cells that have shed the mechanism which "restrains" growth. (The growth of normal cells is "self-limiting," due to a mechanism called "contact inhibition.") Cells without inhibitions, cancer cells will continue to grow and extend over each other in a "chaotic" fashion, destroying the body's normal cells, architecture, and functions.

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline—an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of nineteenth-century *homo economicus*: consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs (the problem of satisfaction and dissatisfaction); buying on credit; mobility—an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of twentieth-century *homo economicus*: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend.

TB was understood, like insanity, to be a kind of one-sidedness: a failure of will or an overintensity. However much the disease was dreaded, TB always had pathos. Like the mental patient today, the tubercular was considered to be someone quintessen-
tially vulnerable, and full of self-destructive whims. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century physicians addressed themselves to coaxing their tubercular patients back to health. Their prescription was the same as the enlightened one for mental patients today: cheerful surroundings, isolation from stress and family, healthy diet, exercise, rest.

The understanding of cancer supports quite different, avowedly brutal notions of treatment. (A common cancer hospital witticism, heard as often from doctors as from patients: “The treatment is worse than the disease.”) There can be no question of pampering the patient. With the patient’s body considered to be under attack (“invasion”), the only treatment is counterattack.

The controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are “invasive.” (“Malignant tumors invade even when they grow very slowly,” as one textbook puts it.) Cancer cells “colonize” from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts (“micrometastases”) whose presence is assumed, though they cannot be detected. Rarely are the body’s “defenses” vigorous enough to obliterate a tumor that has established its own blood supply and consists of billions of destructive cells. However “radical” the surgical intervention, however many “scans”
are taken of the body landscape, most remissions are temporary; the prospects are that “tumor invasion” will continue, or that rogue cells will eventually regroup and mount a new assault on the organism.

Treatment also has a military flavor. Radiotherapy uses the metaphors of aerial warfare; patients are “bombarded” with toxic rays. And chemotherapy is chemical warfare, using poisons.* Treatment aims to “kill” cancer cells (without, it is hoped, killing the patient). Unpleasant side effects of treatment are advertised, indeed overadvertised. (“The agony of chemotherapy” is a standard phrase.) It is impossible to avoid damaging or destroying healthy cells (indeed, some methods used to treat cancer can cause cancer), but it is thought that nearly any damage to the body is justified if it saves the patient’s life. Often, of course, it doesn’t work. (As in: “We had to destroy Ben Suc in order to save it.”) There is everything but the body count.

The military metaphor in medicine first came into

* Drugs of the nitrogen mustard type (so-called alkylating agents) —like cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan) —were the first generation of cancer drugs. Their use—with leukemia (which is characterized by an excessive production of immature white cells), then with other forms of cancer—was suggested by an inadvertent experiment with chemical warfare toward the end of World War II, when an American ship, loaded with nitrogen mustard gas, was blown up in the Naples harbor, and many of the sailors died of their lethally low white-cell and platelet counts (that is, of bone-marrow poisoning) rather than of burns or sea-water inhalation.

Chemotherapy and weaponry seem to go together, if only as a fancy. The first modern chemotherapy success was with syphilis: in 1910, Paul Ehrlich introduced an arsenic derivative, arsphenamine (Salvarsan), which was called “the magic bullet.”
wide use in the 1880s, with the identification of bacteria as agents of disease. Bacteria were said to "invade" or "infiltrate." But talk of siege and war to describe disease now has, with cancer, a striking literalness and authority. Not only is the clinical course of the disease and its medical treatment thus described, but the disease itself is conceived as the enemy on which society wages war. More recently, the fight against cancer has sounded like a colonial war—with similarly vast appropriations of government money—and in a decade when colonial wars haven't gone too well, this militarized rhetoric seems to be backfiring. Pessimism among doctors about the efficacy of treatment is growing, in spite of the strong advances in chemotherapy and immunotherapy made since 1970. Reporters covering "the war on cancer" frequently caution the public to distinguish between official fictions and harsh facts; a few years ago, one science writer found American Cancer Society proclamations that cancer is curable and progress has been made "reminiscent of Vietnam optimism prior to the deluge." Still, it is one thing to be skeptical about the rhetoric that surrounds cancer, another to give support to many uninformed doctors who insist that no significant progress in treatment has been made, and that cancer is not really curable. The bromides of the American cancer establishment, tirelessly hailing the imminent victory over cancer; the professional pessimism of a large number of cancer specialists, talking like battle-weary officers mired down in an interminable colonial
war—these are twin distortions in this military rhetoric about cancer.

Other distortions follow with the extension of cancer images in more grandiose schemes of warfare. As TB was represented as the spiritualizing of consciousness, cancer is understood as the overwhelming or obliterating of consciousness (by a mindless It). In TB, you are eating yourself up, being refined, getting down to the core, the real you. In cancer, non-intelligent ("primitive," "embryonic," "atavistic") cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. Immunologists class the body's cancer cells as "nonself."

It is worth noting that Reich, who did more than anyone else to disseminate the psychological theory of cancer, also found something equivalent to cancer in the biosphere.

There is a deadly orgone energy. It is in the atmosphere. You can demonstrate it on devices such as the Geiger counter. It’s a swampy quality. . . . Stagnant, deadly water which doesn't flow, doesn’t metabolize. Cancer, too, is due to the stagnation of the flow of the life energy of the organism.

Reich's language has its own inimitable coherence. And more and more—as its metaphoric uses gain in
credibility—cancer is felt to be what he thought it was, a cosmic disease, the emblem of all the destructive, alien powers to which the organism is host.

As TB was the disease of the sick self, cancer is the disease of the Other. Cancer proceeds by a science-fiction scenario: an invasion of "alien" or "mutant" cells, stronger than normal cells (Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Incredible Shrinking Man, The Blob, The Thing). One standard science-fiction plot is mutation, either mutants arriving from outer space or accidental mutations among humans. Cancer could be described as a triumphant mutation, and mutation is now mainly an image for cancer. As a theory of the psychological genesis of cancer, the Reichian imagery of energy checked, not allowed to move outward, then turned back on itself, driving cells berserk, is already the stuff of science fiction. And Reich's image of death in the air—of deadly energy that registers on a Geiger counter—suggests how much the science-fiction images about cancer (a disease that comes from deadly rays, and is treated by deadly rays) echo the collective nightmare. The original fear about exposure to atomic radiation was genetic deformities in the next generation; that was replaced by another fear, as statistics started to show much higher cancer rates among Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors and their descendants.

Cancer is a metaphor for what is most ferociously energetic; and these energies constitute the ultimate insult to natural order. In a science-fiction tale by
Tommaso Landolfi, the spaceship is called "Cancer-queen." (It is hardly within the range of the tuberculosis metaphor that a writer could have imagined an intrepid vessel named "Consumptionqueen.") When not being explained away as something psychological, buried in the recesses of the self, cancer is being magnified and projected into a metaphor for the biggest enemy, the furthest goal. Thus, Nixon's bid to match Kennedy's promise to put Americans on the moon was, appropriately enough, the promise to "conquer" cancer. Both were science-fiction ventures. The equivalent of the legislation establishing the space program was the National Cancer Act of 1971, which did not envisage the near-to-hand decisions that could bring under control the industrial economy that pollutes—only the great destination: the cure.

TB was a disease in the service of a romantic view of the world. Cancer is now in the service of a simplistic view of the world that can turn paranoid. The disease is often experienced as a form of demonic possession—tumors are "malignant" or "benign," like forces—and many terrified cancer patients are disposed to seek out faith healers, to be exorcised. The main organized support for dangerous nostrums like Laetrile comes from far-right groups to whose politics of paranoia the fantasy of a miracle cure for cancer makes a serviceable addition, along with a belief in UFOs. (The John Birch Society distributes a forty-five-minute film called World Without Cancer.) For the more sophisticated, cancer signifies the rebellion
of the injured ecosphere: Nature taking revenge on a wicked technocratic world. False hopes and simplified terrors are raised by crude statistics brandished for the general public, such as that 90 percent of all cancers are “environmentally caused,” or that imprudent diet and tobacco smoking alone account for 75 percent of all cancer deaths. To the accompaniment of this numbers game (it is difficult to see how any statistics about “all cancers” or “all cancer deaths” could be defended), cigarettes, hair dyes, bacon, saccharine, hormone-fed poultry, pesticides, low-sulphur coal—a lengthening roll call of products we take for granted have been found to cause cancer. X-rays give cancer (the treatment meant to cure kills); so do emanations from the television set and the microwave oven and the fluorescent clock face. As with syphilis, an innocent or trivial act—or exposure—in the present can have dire consequences far in the future. It is also known that cancer rates are high for workers in a large number of industrial occupations. Though the exact processes of causation lying behind the statistics remain unknown, it seems clear that many cancers are preventable. But cancer is not just a disease ushered in by the Industrial Revolution (there was cancer in Arcadia) and certainly more than the sin of capitalism (within their more limited industrial capacities, the Russians pollute worse than we do). The widespread current view of cancer as a disease of industrial civilization is as unsound scientifically as the right-wing fantasy of a “world without cancer” (like a world without subver-
sives). Both rest on the mistaken feeling that cancer is a distinctively “modern” disease.

The medieval experience of the plague was firmly tied to notions of moral pollution, and people in-variably looked for a scapegoat external to the stricken community. (Massacres of Jews in unprecedented numbers took place everywhere in plague-stricken Europe of 1347–48, then stopped as soon as the plague receded.) With the modern diseases, the scapegoat is not so easily separated from the patient. But much as these diseases individualize, they also pick up some of the metaphors of epidemic diseases. (Diseases understood to be simply epidemic have become less useful as metaphors, as evidenced by the near-total historical amnesia about the influenza pandemic of 1918–19, in which more people died than in the four years of World War I.) Presently, it is as much a cliché to say that cancer is “environmentally” caused as it was—and still is—to say that it is caused by mismanaged emotions. TB was associated with pollution (Florence Nightingale thought it was “induced by the foul air of houses”), and now cancer is thought of as a disease of the contamination of the whole world. TB was “the white plague.” With awareness of environmental pollution, people have started saying that there is an “epidemic” or “plague” of cancer.
Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust. Traditional disease metaphors are principally a way of being vehement; they are, compared with the modern metaphors, relatively contentless. Shakespeare does many variations on a standard form of the metaphor, an infection in the "body politic"—making no distinction between a contagion, an infection, a sore, an abscess, an ulcer, and what we would call a tumor. For purposes of invective, diseases are of only two types: the painful but curable, and the possibly fatal. Particular diseases figure as examples of diseases in general; no disease has its own distinctive logic. Disease imagery is used to express concern for social order, and health is something everyone is presumed to know about. Such metaphors do not project the modern idea of a specific master illness, in which what is at issue is health itself.

Master illnesses like TB and cancer are more specifically polemical. They are used to propose new, critical standards of individual health, and to express a
sense of dissatisfaction with society as such. Unlike the Elizabethan metaphors—which complain of some general aberration or public calamity that is, in consequence, dislocating to individuals—the modern metaphors suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society, with society conceived as the individual’s adversary. Disease metaphors are used to judge society not as out of balance but as repressive. They turn up regularly in Romantic rhetoric which opposes heart to head, spontaneity to reason, nature to artifice, country to city.

When travel to a better climate was invented as a treatment for TB in the early nineteenth century, the most contradictory destinations were proposed. The south, mountains, deserts, islands—their very diversity suggests what they have in common: the rejection of the city. In La Traviata, as soon as Alfredo wins Violetta’s love, he moves her from unhealthy wicked Paris to the wholesome countryside: instant health follows. And Violetta’s giving up on happiness is tantamount to leaving the country and returning to the city —where her doom is sealed, her TB returns, and she dies.

The metaphor of cancer expands the theme of the rejection of the city. In Lost Illusions, in the section called “A Provincial Celebrity in Paris,” Balzac described Lucien de Rubempré after a literary party:

This evening he had seen things as they are. And instead of being seized with horror at the specta-
cle of that cancer in the very heart of Paris . . . he was intoxicated with the pleasure of being in such intellectually brilliant society. These remarkable men, with their dazzling armor of vice.

Before the city was understood as, literally, a cancer-causing (carcinogenic) environment, the city was seen as itself a cancer—a place of abnormal, unnatural growth, and extravagant, devouring, armored passions.*

Throughout the nineteenth century, disease metaphors become more virulent, preposterous, demagogic. And there is an increasing tendency to call any situation one disapproves of a disease. Disease, which could be considered as much a part of nature as is health, became the synonym of whatever was "unnatural." In Les Misérables, Hugo wrote:

Monasticism, such as it existed in Spain and as it exists in Tibet, is for civilization a sort of tubercu-

* In The Living City (1958), Frank Lloyd Wright compared the city of earlier times, a healthy organism ("The city then was not malignant"), with the modern city. "To look at the cross-section of any plan of a big city is to look at the section of a fibrous tumor." The sociologist Herbert Gans has called my attention to the importance of tuberculosis and the alleged or real threat of it in the slum-clearing and "model tenament" movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the feeling being that slum housing "bred" TB. The shift from TB to cancer in planning and housing rhetoric had taken place by the 1950s. "Blight" (a virtual synonym for slum) is seen as a cancer that spreads insidiously, and the use of the term "invasion" to describe when the non-white and poor move into a middle-class neighborhood is as much a metaphor borrowed from cancer as from the military: the two discourses overlap.
loss. It cuts off life. Quite simply, it depopulates.
Confinement, castration. It was a scourge in Europe.

Bichat in 1800 defined life as “the ensemble of functions which resists death.” That contrast between life and death was to be transferred to a contrast between life and disease. Disease (now equated with death) is what opposes life.

In 1916, in “Socialism and Culture,” Gramsci denounced

the habit of thinking that culture is encyclopedic knowledge. . . . This form of culture serves to create that pale and broken-winded intellectualism . . . which has produced a whole crowd of boasters and daydreamers more harmful to a healthy social life than tuberculosis or syphilis microbes are to the body’s beauty and health. . . .

In 1919, Mandelstam paid the following tribute to Pasternak:

To read Pasternak’s verse is to clear one’s throat, to fortify one’s breathing, to fill one’s lungs; such poetry must be healthy, a cure for tuberculosis. No poetry is healthier at the present moment. It is like drinking koumiss after canned American milk.
And Marinetti, denouncing Communism in 1920:

Communism is the exasperation of the bureaucratic cancer that has always wasted humanity. A German cancer, a product of the characteristic German preparationism. Every pedantic preparation is anti-human. . . .

It is for the same iniquity that the protofascist Italian writer attacks Communism and the future founder of the Italian Communist Party attacks a certain bourgeois idea of culture ("truly harmful, especially to the proletariat," Gramsci says)—for being artificial, pedantic, rigid, lifeless. Both TB and cancer have been regularly invoked to condemn repressive practices and ideals, repression being conceived of as an environment that deprives one of strength (TB) or of flexibility and spontaneity (cancer). Modern disease metaphors specify an ideal of society's well-being, analogized to physical health, that is as frequently anti-political as it is a call for a new political order.

Order is the oldest concern of political philosophy, and if it is plausible to compare the polis to an organism, then it is plausible to compare civil disorder to an illness. The classical formulations which analogize a political disorder to an illness—from Plato to, say,
Hobbes—presuppose the classical medical (and political) idea of balance. Illness comes from imbalance. Treatment is aimed at restoring the right balance—in political terms, the right hierarchy. The prognosis is always, in principle, optimistic. Society, by definition, never catches a fatal disease.

When a disease image is used by Machiavelli, the presumption is that the disease can be cured. "Consumption," he wrote,

in the commencement is easy to cure, and difficult to understand; but when it has neither been discovered in due time, nor treated upon a proper principle, it becomes easy to understand, and difficult to cure. The same thing happens in state affairs, by foreseeing them at a distance, which is only done by men of talents, the evils which might arise from them are soon cured; but when, from want of foresight, they are suffered to increase to such a height that they are perceptible to everyone, there is no longer any remedy.

Machiavelli invokes TB as a disease whose progress can be cut off, if it is detected at an early stage (when its symptoms are barely visible). Given proper foresight, the course of a disease is not irreversible; the same for disturbances in the body politic. Machiavelli offers an illness metaphor that is not so much about society as about statecraft (conceived as a therapeutic
art): as prudence is needed to control serious diseases, so foresight is needed to control social crises. It is a metaphor about foresight, and a call to foresight.

In political philosophy’s great tradition, the analogy between disease and civil disorder is proposed to encourage rulers to pursue a more rational policy. “Although nothing can be immortall, which mortals make,” Hobbes wrote,

yet, if men had the use of reason they pretend to, their Commonwealths might be secured, at least, from perishing by internal diseases. . . . Therefore when they come to be dissolved, not by externall violence, but intestine disorder, the fault is not in men, as they are the Matter; but as they are the Makers, and orderers of them.

Hobbes’s view is anything but fatalistic. Rulers have the responsibility and the ability (through reason) to control disorder. For Hobbes, murder (“externall violence”) is the only “natural” way for a society or institution to die. To perish from internal disorder—analagized to a disease—is suicide, something quite preventable; an act of will, or rather a failure of will (that is, of reason).

The disease metaphor was used in political philosophy to reinforce the call for a rational response. Machiavelli and Hobbes fixed on one part of medical wisdom, the importance of cutting off serious disease
early, while it is relatively easy to control. The disease metaphor could also be used to encourage rulers to another kind of foresight. In 1708, Lord Shaftesbury wrote:

There are certain humours in mankind which of necessity must have vent. The human mind and body are both of them naturally subject to commotions . . . as there are strange ferments in the blood, which in many bodies occasion an extraordinary discharge. . . . Should physicians endeavour absolutely to allay those ferments of the body, and strike in the humours which discover themselves in such eruptions, they might, instead of making a cure, bid fair perhaps to raise a plague, and turn a spring-ague or an autumn-surfet into an epidemical malignant fever. They are certainly as ill physicians in the body politic who would needs be tampering with these mental eruptions, and, under the specious pretence of healing this itch of superstition and saving souls from the contagion of enthusiasm, should set all nature in an uproar, and turn a few innocent carbuncles into an inflammation and mortal gangrene.

Shaftesbury's point is that it is rational to tolerate a certain amount of irrationality ("superstition," "enthusiasm"), and that stern repressive measures are likely to aggravate disorder rather than cure it, turning
a nuisance into a disaster. The body politic should not be overmedicalized; a remedy should not be sought for every disorder.

For Machiavelli, foresight; for Hobbes, reason; for Shaftesbury, tolerance—these are all ideas of how proper statecraft, conceived on a medical analogy, can prevent a fatal disorder. Society is presumed to be in basically good health; disease (disorder) is, in principle, always manageable.

In the modern period, the use of disease imagery in political rhetoric implies other, less lenient assumptions. The modern idea of revolution, based on an estimate of the unremitting bleakness of the existing political situation, shattered the old, optimistic use of disease metaphors. John Adams wrote in his diary, in December 1772:

The Prospect before me . . . is very gloomy. My Country is in deep Distress, and has very little Ground of Hope. . . . The Body of the People seem to be worn out, by struggling, and Venality, Servility and Prostitution, eat and spread like a Cancer.

Political events started commonly to be defined as being unprecedented, radical; and eventually both civil disturbances and wars come to be understood as, really,
revolutions. As might be expected, it was not with the American but with the French Revolution that disease metaphors in the modern sense came into their own—particularly in the conservative response to the French Revolution. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke contrasted older wars and civil disturbances with this one, which he considered to have a totally new character. Before, no matter what the disaster, “the organs . . . of the state, however shattered, existed.” But, he addressed the French, “your present confusion, like a palsy, has attacked the fountain of life itself.”

As classical theories of the polis have gone the way of the theories of the four humours, so a modern idea of politics has been complemented by a modern idea of disease. Disease equals death. Burke invoked palsy (and “the living ulcer of a corroding memory”). The emphasis was soon to be on diseases that are loathsome and fatal. Such diseases are not to be managed or treated; they are to be attacked. In Hugo’s novel about the French Revolution, *Quatre-vingt-treize* (1874), the revolutionary Gauvain, condemned to the guillotine, absolves the Revolution with all its bloodshed, including his own imminent execution, because it is a storm. A storm always knows what it is doing. . . . Civilization was in the grip of plague; this gale comes to the rescue. Perhaps it is not selective enough. Can it act otherwise? It is entrusted with the arduous task of sweeping away
disease! In face of the horrible infection, I understand the fury of the blast.

It is hardly the last time that revolutionary violence would be justified on the grounds that society has a radical, horrible illness. The melodramatics of the disease metaphor in modern political discourse assume a punitive notion: of the disease not as a punishment but as a sign of evil, something to be punished.

Modern totalitarian movements, whether of the right or of the left, have been peculiarly—and revealingly—inclined to use disease imagery. The Nazis declared that someone of mixed “racial” origin was like a syphilitic. European Jewry was repeatedly analogized to syphilis, and to a cancer that must be excised. Disease metaphors were a staple of Bolshevik polemics, and Trotsky, the most gifted of all communist polemists, used them with the greatest profusion—particularly after his banishment from the Soviet Union in 1929. Stalinism was called a cholera, a syphilis, and a cancer.* To use only fatal diseases for imagery in poli-

* Cf. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (1963): “‘Certain measures,’ Trotsky wrote to [Philip] Rahv [on March 21, 1938], ‘are necessary for a struggle against incorrect theory, and others for fighting a cholera epidemic. Stalin is incomparably nearer to cholera than to a false theory. The struggle must be intense, truculent, merciless. An element of “fanaticism” . . . is salutary.’” And: “Trotsky spoke of the ‘syphilis of Stalinism’ or of the ‘cancer that must be burned out of the labour movement with a hot iron.’ . . .”

Notably, Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* contains virtually no uses of cancer as a metaphor—for Stalinism, or for anything else. Sol-
tics gives the metaphor a much more pointed character. Now, to liken a political event or situation to an illness is to impute guilt, to prescribe punishment.

This is particularly true of the use of cancer as a metaphor. It amounts to saying, first of all, that the event or situation is unqualifiedly and unredeemably wicked. It enormously ups the ante. Hitler, in his first political tract, an anti-Semitic diatribe written in September 1919, accused the Jews of producing “a racial tuberculosis among nations.”* Tuberculosis still retained its prestige as the overdetermined, culpable illness of the nineteenth century. (Recall Hugo’s comparison of monasticism with TB.) But the Nazis quickly modernized their rhetoric, and indeed the imagery of cancer was far more apt for their purposes. As was said in speeches about “the Jewish problem” throughout the 1930s, to treat a cancer, one must cut out much of the healthy tissue around it. The imagery

zhenitsyn was not misrepresenting his novel when, hoping to get it published in the Soviet Union, he told the Board of the Union of Writers in 1967 that the title was not “some kind of symbol,” as was being charged, and that “the subject is specifically and literally cancer.”

* “[The Jew’s] power is the power of money which in the form of interest effortlessly and interminably multiples itself in his hands and forces upon nations that most dangerous of yokes. . . . Everything which makes men strive for higher things, whether religion, socialism, or democracy, is for him only a means to an end, to the satisfaction of a lust for money and domination. His activities produce a racial tuberculosis among nations. . . .” A late-nineteenth-century precursor of Nazi ideology, Julius Langbehn, called the Jews “only a passing pest and cholera.” But in Hitler’s TB image there is already something easily transferred to cancer: the idea that Jewish power “effortlessly and interminably multiplies.”

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of cancer for the Nazis prescribes “radical” treatment, in contrast to the “soft” treatment thought appropriate for TB—the difference between sanatoria (that is, exile) and surgery (that is, crematoria). (The Jews were also identified with, and became a metaphor for, city life—with Nazi rhetoric echoing all the Romantic clichés about cities as a debilitating, merely cerebral, morally contaminated, unhealthy environment.)

To describe a phenomenon as a cancer is an incitement to violence. The use of cancer in political discourse encourages fatalism and justifies “severe” measures—as well as strongly reinforcing the widespread notion that the disease is necessarily fatal. The concept of disease is never innocent. But it could be argued that the cancer metaphors are in themselves implicitly genocidal. No specific political view seems to have a monopoly on this metaphor. Trotsky called Stalinism the cancer of Marxism; in China in the last year, the Gang of Four have become, among other things, “the cancer of China.” John Dean explained Watergate to Nixon: “We have a cancer within—close to the Presidency—that’s growing.” The standard metaphor of Arab polemics—heard by Israelis on the radio every day for the last twenty years—is that Israel is “a cancer in the heart of the Arab world” or “the cancer of the Middle East,” and an officer with the Christian Lebanese rightist forces besieging the Palestine refugee camp of Tal Zaatar in August 1976 called the camp “a cancer in the Lebanese body.” The cancer metaphor seems hard to resist for those who wish to
register indignation. Thus, Neal Ascherson wrote in 1969 that the Slansky Affair “was—is—a huge cancer in the body of the Czechoslovak state and nation”; Simon Leys, in *Chinese Shadows*, speaks of “the Maoist cancer that is gnawing away at the face of China”; D. H. Lawrence called masturbation “the deepest and most dangerous cancer of our civilization”; and I once wrote, in the heat of despair over America’s war on Vietnam, that “the white race is the cancer of human history.”

But how to be morally severe in the late twentieth century? How, when there is so much to be severe about; how, when we have a sense of evil but no longer the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil. Trying to comprehend “radical” or “absolute” evil, we search for adequate metaphors. But the modern disease metaphors are all cheap shots. The people who have the real disease are also hardly helped by hearing their disease’s name constantly being dropped as the epitome of evil. Only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness. And the cancer metaphor is particularly crass. It is invariably an encouragement to simplify what is complex and an invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism.

It is instructive to compare the image of cancer with that of gangrene. With some of the same metaphoric properties as cancer—it starts from nothing; it spreads; it is disgusting—gangrene would seem to be laden with everything a polemicist would want. In-
Indeed, it was used in one important moral polemic—against the French use of torture in Algeria in the 1950s; the title of the famous book exposing that torture was called *La Gangrène*. But there is a large difference between the cancer and the gangrene metaphors. First, causality is clear with gangrene. It is external (gangrene can develop from a scratch); cancer is understood as mysterious, a disease with multiple causes, internal as well as external. Second, gangrene is not as all-encompassing a disaster. It leads often to amputation, less often to death; cancer is presumed to lead to death in most cases. Not gangrene—and not the plague (despite the notable attempts by writers as different as Artaud, Reich, and Camus to impose that as a metaphor for the dismal and the disastrous)—but cancer remains the most radical of disease metaphors. And just because it is so radical, it is particularly tendentious—a good metaphor for paranoids, for those who need to turn campaigns into crusades, for the fatalistic (*cancer = death*), and for those under the spell of ahistorical revolutionary optimism (the idea that only the most radical changes are desirable). As long as so much militaristic hyperbole attaches to the description and treatment of cancer, it is a particularly unapt metaphor for the peace-loving.

It is, of course, likely that the language about cancer will evolve in the coming years. It must change, decisively, when the disease is finally understood and the rate of cure becomes much higher. It is already changing, with the development of new forms of treat-
ment. As chemotherapy is more and more supplanting radiation in the treatment of cancer patients, an effective form of treatment (already a supplementary treatment of proven use) seems likely to be found in some kind of immunotherapy. Concepts have started to shift in certain medical circles, where doctors are concentrating on the steep buildup of the body’s immunological responses to cancer. As the language of treatment evolves from military metaphors of aggressive warfare to metaphors featuring the body’s “natural defenses” (what is called the “immunodefensive system” can also—to break entirely with the military metaphor—be called the body’s “immune competence”), cancer will be partly de-mythicized; and it may then be possible to compare something to a cancer without implying either a fatalistic diagnosis or a rousing call to fight by any means whatever a lethal, insidious enemy. Then perhaps it will be morally permissible, as it is not now, to use cancer as a metaphor.

But at that time, perhaps nobody will want any longer to compare anything awful to cancer. Since the interest of the metaphor is precisely that it refers to a disease so overlaid with mystification, so charged with the fantasy of inescapable fatality. Since our views about cancer, and the metaphors we have imposed on it, are so much a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture, for our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real “problems of growth,” for our inability to construct an advanced industrial soci-
ety which properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history. The cancer metaphor will be made obsolete, I would predict, long before the problems it has reflected so persuasively will be resolved.