# *Cancer Ward* and the Literature of Disease

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> The literature of disease is more interesting to me than all the healthy books.
>
> T. E. Lawrence[1]

> Disease . . . First of all it is a question of who is sick, who is insane, who is epileptic or paralytic: an average dolt, whose disease, of course, lacks all intellectual and cultural aspects—or a Nietzsche, a Dostoyevsky.
>
> Thomas Mann[2]

Modern European literature often concerns the abnormal and the pathological. Characterized by a macabre sensibility, an attraction to decay and nothingness, an obsession with physical corruption and death, it is defined by a mood of dissolution and disintegration, of paralyzing anxiety and metaphysical despair. Modern writers have inherited from the Romantic period the idea that the artist is ill, and that his illness gives him psychic knowledge and spiritual power. Thomas Mann—following Goethe's maxim: "The Classical I call the healthy, the Romantic the sick"—equates the latter with pathology. He believes "Romanticism bears in its heart the germ of morbidity, as the rose bears the worm; its innermost character is seduction, seduction to death." In *Notes from Underground,* Dostoyevsky insists that "too great lucidity is a disease, a true, full-fledged disease"[3] because this heightened consciousness forces one to see terrible truths about human existence. Rimbaud calls for a reasoned derangement of all the senses that would





enable the tormented, sacrificial, even insane artist to become "the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed" and to plunge into unknown, "unheard of, unnameable" visions.[4] And Nietzsche associates exuberance of the spirit with extreme pain and psychological malaise, and believes that artistic greatness is earned by physical suffering: "One pays dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive."[5]

In his great essay on "Goethe and Tolstoy" and his more cautious "Dostoyevsky—in Moderation," Mann places himself firmly in the Romantic tradition by a Nietzschean exaltation of the aesthetic aspects of "genius-bestowing disease." In the first essay he paradoxically claims that disease gives dignity to man because it brings out his spiritual qualities:

> Disease has two faces and a double relation to man and his human dignity. On the one hand it is hostile: by overstressing the physical, by throwing man back upon his body, it has a dehumanizing effect. On the other hand, it is possible to think and feel about illness as a highly dignified human phenomenon. . . . . In disease, resides the dignity of man; and the genius of disease is more human than the genius of health.[6]

In the second essay Mann quotes Nietzsche's dictum: "Exceptional conditions make the artist . . . conditions that are profoundly related and interlaced with morbid phenomena; it seems impossible to be an artist and not be sick." He then connects Dostoyevsky's and Nietzsche's psychological insight and artistic genius with their diseases: epilepsy and syphilis. And he concludes with the Rimbaudian paradox that the health of humanity can be achieved only by the sacrificial sickness of its artists:

> Certain attainments of the soul and intellect are impossible without disease, without insanity, without spiritual crime, and the great invalids are crucified victims, sacrificed to humanity and its advancement, to the broadening of its feeling and knowledge—in short, to its more sublime health.[7]

In Mann's own works, as Erich Kahler observes, the artist is portrayed as an outcast who renounces life in order to create art:

> culture and intellect are represented as decadence, love associated with decline; the artist is seen as a pariah from the start, iridescent with suspect hues, shading into the daemon, the invalid, the adventurer, the criminal; already he is stranded in the ironic situation of expressing a life he himself is unable to live.[8]

And in Edmund Wilson's symbolic myth of "the wound and the bow," the essential sickness of the artist is represented by the archer Philoc-

tetes, who is degraded by a malodorous disease that renders him abhorrent to society, but "is also the master of a superhuman art which everybody has to respect and which the normal man finds he needs."[9]

In her essay "On Being Ill" (1930), Virginia Woolf notes the importance of disease as a means of moral exploration and wonders why literature has not seriously concerned itself with this crucial area of human experience: "Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed . . . it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature."[10] But in the last century writers (including a number of doctors: Anton Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, Gottfried Benn, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Walker Percy) have increasingly turned to the kind of clinical literature which their predecessors tended to avoid.[11] In the very greatest works—Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (cancer), Gide's *The Immoralist* (tuberculosis), Mann's *Death in Venice* (cholera), *The Magic Mountain* (tuberculosis), *Doctor Faustus* (syphilis), *The Black Swan* (cancer), Camus's *The Plague* (bubonic plague), A. E. Ellis' *The Rack* (tuberculosis), and Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*—disease is both the literal subject of the novel and the symbol of moral, social, or political pathology.

Writers like Kafka, Lawrence, Mansfield, and Orwell, who died of tuberculosis, rarely wrote fiction about their own disease (though there are hints of it in the heroes of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *1984)* and confined their descriptions to personal letters. Solzhenitsyn—who suffered from cancer, endured the dreadful stages of dying, pondered the nature of life and death—writes directly about his own illness. But he was only able to transmute his illness into art *after* he was cured and had the strength to perceive his disease more objectively. In his novel cancer is horrible, suffering extreme, cure impossible.

Unlike Mann, who observed illness intellectually, Solzhenitsyn earned his insight through actual experience. He writes in the tradition of Russian realism, of Tolstoy and Chekhov, and resolutely renounces the Romantic attitude toward disease. He does not believe the artist is sick or that disease inspires creative genius, aesthetic insight, spiritual knowledge, or human dignity. And he certainly does not believe that the artist must stand outside society.

*Cancer Ward* (1968) rejects the spiritual self-destruction of *Notes from Underground,* in which the masochistic hero proclaims:





> "I'm a sick man . . . a mean man. There's nothing attractive about me. I think there is something wrong with my liver. . . . I'm fully aware that I can't spite the doctors by refusing their help. I know very well that I'm harming myself and no one else. But still, it's out of spite that I refuse to ask for the doctor's help. So my liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!"[12]

It also rejects the physical disgust for the human body portrayed in Gottfried Benn's horrifying "Man and Woman Go Through the Cancer Ward":

> The man:
> Here in this row are wombs that have decayed,
> and in this row are breasts that have decayed.
> Bed beside stinking bed. Hourly the sisters change.
>
> Come, quietly lift up this coverlet,
> Look, this great mass of fat and ugly humours
> was precious to a man once, and
> meant ecstasy and home.
>
> Come, now look at the scars upon this breast.
> Do you feel the rosary of small soft knots?
> Feel it, no fear. The flesh yields and is numb.
>
> Here's one who bleeds as though from thirty bodies.
> No one has so much blood.
> They had to cut
> a child from this one, from her cancerous womb.[13]

The literary precursor of *Cancer Ward* is Chekhov's "Ward 6." In that bitter but compassionate story, the sane doctor is locked up in a mental ward by lunatics who symbolize the hopelessness and corruption of Russia. Solzhenitsyn follows Chekhov in his courageous confrontation of disease, his profound sympathy, his transformation of the clinical into the poetical, his concern with the moral aspects of illness, and his use of sickness to symbolize social pathology.

The facts established in David Burg and George Feifer's biography, *Solzhenitsyn* (1972), match (and are partly based on) Oleg Kostoglotov's autobiographical revelations in Chapter 6 of *Cancer Ward.*[14] Solzhenitsyn was arrested by the KGB for criticizing Stalin in personal letters to a close friend, while fighting as an artillery officer in German territory in February 1945. He was sentenced to eight years of forced labor in a Siberian concentration camp, described in *One Day in the Life*

*of Ivan Denisovich.* In Ekibastuz prison (southeast of Omsk) in February 1952, he was stricken by a fast-swelling intestinal cancer and was prepared for a prompt operation. But before it could be performed, the surgeon-prisoner was suddenly transferred to another camp.

The tumor was excised by a second surgeon, and a section of tissue—without his name or camp on it—was sent north to Omsk for laboratory analysis. The incision soon healed; and though still in pain, he returned to work carrying heavy boxes of liquid concrete. The medical report, which diagnosed the tumor as rapidly developing and acutely malignant cancer that needed immediate treatment, was eventually sent back to the camp. But the negligent officials did not bother to track down the anonymous prisoner-patient, and the diagnosis was not revealed to him. The operation retarded the tumor, the pain subsided, and he felt he had made an astonishing recovery.

Solzhenitsyn, forbidden to return to European Russia after his release from the prison camp, was sent to "perpetual exile" in remote Kazakhstan. In Berlik, in the fall of 1953, he was again stricken by cancer and frequently fainted from overpowering pain. Unable at first to get permission from the local police to enter a hospital, he traveled illegally into the nearby mountains to seek help from an old man who practiced folk medicine, and was temporarily kept alive by a root containing aconite. When he finally arrived at the hospital in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in January 1954, the doctors gave him three weeks to live. On the frontier of death, deprived of the ability to eat and sleep, and poisoned by the tumor's toxin, he said: "I was practically a corpse. I came there expecting to die."[15]

Solzhenitsyn was treated with x-rays and hormones, the pain disappeared, sleep and appetite eventually returned. Three months later he emerged from the hospital with renewed emotional strength and spiritual confidence. He still had to take powerful medicines, but said that the tumor no longer interfered with his life. It had changed its nature and forfeited its malignancy. In March 1954 he confessed: "I didn't dare admit even to myself that I was recovering. Even in fleeting dreams I measured the span that had been added to my life not in years, but months."[16] That spring was the most painful and most lovely season of his life.

Solzhenitsyn's obsessive, even fanatical commitment to record the truth of his experiences, which became a paradigm for life in Stalinist Russia, was intensified by his sense of lost life and renunciation of love: in the army, prison, exile, and hospital. In his autobiographical *The Oak and the Calf* (1980), he explains:





> I had gone on writing—as a bricklayer, in overcrowded prison huts, in transit jails without so much as a pencil, when I was dying of cancer, in an exile's hovel after a double teaching shift. I had let nothing—dangers, hindrances, the need for rest—interrupt my writing. . . . I had made my years of exile miserable—years of furious longing for a woman—because I was afraid for my books, afraid that some Komsomol girl would betray me. After four years of war and eight years of imprisonment, my first three years as a free man were years of misery, repression and frustration.[17]

When threatened by cancer, after surviving the war and prison, he feared "all that I had memorized in the camps ran the risk of extinction together with the head that held it. This was a dreadful moment in my life: to die on the threshold of freedom, to see all I had written, all that gave meaning to my life thus far, about to perish with me."[18] *Cancer Ward,* whose subject (writes Solzhenitsyn) "is specifically and literally cancer, a subject avoided in literature, but nevertheless a reality as its victims know only too well from daily experience,"[19] is his tribute to human dignity and man's power of survival.

*Cancer Ward* is the most complete and accurate fictional account of the nature of disease and its relation to love. It describes the characteristics of cancer; the physical, psychological, and moral effects on the victim; the conditions of the hospital; the relations of patients and doctors; the terrifying treatments; the possibility of death. While discussing the concentration camps, Kostoglotov raises the central questions of the novel, and connects the pathological and political themes: "How much can one pay for life, and how much is too much?" He decides that "the betrayal or destruction of good and helpless people is too high a price, that our lives aren't worth it."

In the novel cancer, which in 1955 could never be completely cured, is a frightening disease that causes prolonged suffering. Its rapid but hidden growth, unseen and unsuspected, develops an inexorable will and "acquires rights of its own." It is usually not discovered until it has reached an advanced and often fatal state.

The spiritual wounds of the embittered patient are devastating. He attempts to fight self-pity with courage, and is grateful for any small comfort or brief remission—however temporary and deceptive. The treatment is not explained to the patient, who must face mockery, humiliation, and pain. The hard lump of tumor drags in the victim "like a fish on a hook" and isolates him from his past life. It diminishes the will, eliminates defenses, dignity, influence, status, reputation, and

hope. It turns him inward toward his own sickness, so that Kostoglotov "learned how to be ill, he was a specialist in being ill, he was devoted to his illness."

The torture and inhuman conditions of the hospital, an antechamber to the tomb, intensify the mental and physical suffering. The smelly toilets and squalid wards reduce everyone to the common denominator of illness. The doctors—"assassins in white coats"—continually lie to the patients, who see through their falsehoods and resent their assumed omnipotence. They employ reckless and even savage treatments that are bound to be discredited in the future, take control of the patient's body, decide about his life and death.

Since "any damage to the body was justified if it saved life," the radical treatment of cancer—by surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy—is often worse than the disease. Dr. Dontsova contracts cancer from prolonged exposure to radium. Solzhenitsyn's description of the barbarous bombardment of x-rays, which pierces through the layers and organs of the body, streams into the walls and floors of the hospital, penetrates the soil and rocks of the earth, is a masterpiece of physiological and psychological insight:

> Through the square of skin that had been left clear on his stomach, through the layers of flesh and organs whose names their owner himself did not know, through the mass of the toadlike tumor, through the stomach and entrails, through the blood that flowed along his arteries and veins, through lymph and cells, through the spine and lesser bones and again through more layers of flesh, vessels and skin on his back, then through the hard wooden board of the couch, through the four-centimeter-thick floorboards, through the props, through the filling beneath the boards, down, down, until they disappeared into the very stone foundations of the building or into the earth, poured the harsh X-rays, the trembling vectors of electric and magnetic fields, unimaginable to the human mind, or else more comprehensible quanta that like shells out of guns pounded and riddled everything in their path.

Like x-rays, cancer strips the patient down to the essential core: behind Asya's "dressing gown there was nothing but her nightdress, her breasts and her soul." Only the passive Tartar can accept the heavy burden of truth. Death, "white and indifferent—a sheet, bodiless and void, walks toward him carefully, noiselessly, on slippered feet." Solzhenitsyn believes that "Modern man is helpless when confronted with death, [for] he has no weapon to meet it with"—no Christian faith or spiritual strength to oppose materialism. As Iris Murdoch observes in





her perceptive, compassionate opening of *Nuns and Soldiers,* we defensively reject the dying so that we will not be too hurt by their loss. Death destroys our illusions about love and shows that it is ultimately selfish:

> We do not want to care too much for what we are losing. Surreptitiously we remove our sympathy, and prepare the dying one for death, diminish him, strip him of his last attractions. We abandon the dying like a sick beast left under a hedge. Death is supposed to show us truth, but is its own place of illusion. It defeats love.[20]

Kostoglotov's vital question about the price of life, symbolized by oxygen and blood, recurs in two of the greatest scenes of the novel, when he first establishes intimacy with the nurse Zoya and the doctor Vera. As Virginia Woolf observes: "Illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks."[21] Kostoglotov, whose moral strength attracts these women, is assertive and masculine with Zoya, passive and feminine with Vera. He kisses the distracted Zoya while she inflates a tumescent oxygen balloon, which almost bursts. She then tells him that he has been deceived by the doctors and has been given hormone therapy (also used against cancer of the testes) that will make him impotent. And she strongly urges him to discontinue the treatment.

The question arises for the third time during the transfusion. As Kostoglotov becomes affectionate with Vera they abandon their patient-doctor roles and speak as equals, perhaps even lovers. She is "faithful" to and alone with him in the sunlit room; he sheds his suspicions, "gives himself to trust" and accepts the flow of a female's blood into his veins. By doing so, he forms a symbolic sexual union with Vera and wants to kiss her (he later asks her to give him another transfusion: "I liked it then. I want more"): "The blood in the bottle had already dropped by more than half. It had once flowed in someone else's body, a body with its own personality, its own ideas, and now it was pouring into him, a reddish-brown stream of health."

But Kostoglotov protests that he is "paying too high a price" for his existence: "First my own life was taken from me [in prison], and now I am being deprived even of the right . . . to perpetuate myself. . . . If the only expectation I have is being consciously and artificially killed—then why bother to save [me]?" His question leads them to discuss some books written by the venerologist Dr. Friedland, and read by Kostoglotov and Vera in the 1930s. These works present a purely physiological and even statistical—rather than emotional and spiritual—view of sex and love. Their rejection of Dr. Friedland's materialism allows

Kostoglotov to hope that he will be able to love a woman without sex or the possibility of procreation. He therefore accepts the advice of Vera, who (in contrast to Zoya) insists that he continue the hormone treatments in order to save his life.

A parallel scene and love affair (Kostoglotov mourns his lost virility, Asya her lost femininity) occurs between the young student Dyomka, who has cancer of the leg and is threatened with amputation, and the hedonistic and licentious schoolgirl, Asya. When Asya—crushed, trembling and tearful—reveals that the doctors must cut off her cancerous breast and asks (like Kostoglotov) "What have I to live for?," Dyomka ignores the dreadful consequences and offers to marry her. She then exposes her doomed breast and asks him to kiss it. Dyomka gratefully suckles the gently curving breast and becomes absorbed in its fiery aura: "He returned to its rosy glow again and again, softly kissing the breast. He did what her future child would never be able to do. No one came in, and so he kissed and kissed the marvel hanging over him. Today it was a marvel. Tomorrow it would be in the trash bin." Despite the bitter irony, Solzhenitsyn suggests, by merging the maternal and the sexual, that the spiritual *can* survive without the physical aspects of love, and reinforces the previous rejection of Dr. Friedland's materialistic view of love.

By the end of the novel Kostoglotov, who had experienced a brief sexual resurgence before he had been simultaneously saved and destroyed by the hormone therapy, is confronted with the reality of his condition. After his release from the hospital he is invited to spend the night with both Zoya ("life") and Vera ("faith"). He seeks out the brilliant flowering apricot tree which, like the splendid ballet *Sleeping Beauty,* symbolizes his personal resurrection and promising return to life. When he accidentally presses against an attractive young girl in the streetcar, he realizes that he has permanently lost his virility ("the libido remains, the libido but nothing else"). He is forced to accept the cruel fact that "his journey to see Vera would end as a torture and a deceit. It would mean his demanding more from her than he could ask from himself." He now understands that love must be both physical (as with Zoya) *and* spiritual (as with Vera), and refuses to sacrifice Vera's love for his own well-being. His experiences in the cancer ward have made him unfit for life and led him to renounce love.

In *Illness as Metaphor,* Susan Sontag quite mistakenly insists that "*Cancer Ward* contains virtually no use of cancer as a metaphor—for Stalinism, or anything else."[22] But the political allegory is both distinct





and significant. As Solzhenitsyn says of his own characters: "Those were the words they used, but the looks they gave each other were keen and it was clear that they were really concerned with something quite different." The novel logically follows, in its consistent use of suggestive analogies, the inevitable mode of personal conversation, private correspondence and underground literature in the Soviet Union.

The hospital records five possible results for each category of medical treatment: "complete cure, improvement, no change, deterioration or death." These categories correspond to the five phases of Solzhenitsyn's life—youth, war, exile, prison and hospital—that are clearly reflected in the novel. Like Solzhenitsyn, Orwell draws a direct parallel between war and disease in his moving autobiographical essay, "How the Poor Die": "People talk about the horrors of war, but what weapon has man invented that even approaches in cruelty some of the commoner diseases? 'Natural' death, almost by definition, means something slow, smelly and painful."[23]

In *Cancer Ward,* Solzhenitsyn draws on his military experience as a metaphor for both the invasion of the hostile disease and the victim's desperate battle against it. Solitary, destructive cells steal "through the darkness like landing craft"; spreading cancers tear "defenses to pieces like tanks"; victims are "wounded" and soon fall; survivors are heroes "from the hospital front line." Dr. Dontsova, who forces the skeptical Kostoglotov to accept his treatment, explains: "there was a battle, but he was defeated and he surrendered." The x-ray's "blind artillery cuts down its own men with the same pleasure as it does the enemy's." The tumor is driven back: "It's on the defensive."

Kostoglotov's years as a prisoner, like his experience as a soldier, are also analogous to his treatment in the confined and crowded hospital. The prison cell is like the cancer cell: "first I lived under guard, then I lived in pain." In prison he is torn from his family, banished from the world and put behind barbed wire. But that is no "easier to take than a tumor," which also denies him the rights of a free and healthy man. The patient-prisoner is powerless, watchful and suspicious. He is enclosed for an indefinite period of time, interrogated by doctors, and once again becomes "a grain of sand, just as [he] was in the camp." A confession of illness is like a confession of crime. In the hospital, "the rooms are full of bunks, complete with bedding, and on each bunk lies a little man terrified out of his wits."

A few men manage to survive the cancer ward just as they survived the camp. But Kostoglotov believes: "I probably won't be discharged till I'm crawling on all fours." When a deluded patient leaves the hospital,

Kostoglotov is reminded of "those rare occasions when they saw off a prisoner who had been released. Was he to tell him that he'd be arrested again as soon as he set foot outside the gates?" Both camp and ward are places "where ninety-nine weep but [only] one laughs."

Kostoglotov is not the only one in this microcosmic society who has been in the camps. Just as the Tartars "had no difficulty in recognizing their own people in the clinic, [neither] did those who once lived in the shadow of barbed-wire." Lev Leonidovich has worked as a free doctor in the prison camps. The Tartar Ahmadjan, one of the very few patients who is ostensibly cured, has been a concentration camp guard. The brutal Podduyev, whose moral life is rather improbably transformed by studying Tolstoy's *What Men Live By,* has supervised convict labor. And the intelligent orderly Elizaveta Anatolyevna, who reads French novels, has been innocently imprisoned with her husband. The past of these characters tightens the links between prison and hospital. They draw Kostoglotov back—through memories, associations and conversations—to the world he is trying to escape.

The KGB man Rusanov, the one-dimensional villain of the novel, brings the prison world into the hospital by his practical support and ideological justification of Stalinism. He named his son after Beria; loves the People but cannot tolerate actual human beings; betrayed his friend Rodichev in order to get the other half of their communal apartment; carried out his "simple duty as a citizen" by dismissing and eliminating many others; and stoutly defends Stalin's purge trials, which he used to build his career at the expense of men like Kostoglotov: "In that excellent and honorable time, the years 1937 and 1938, the social atmosphere was noticeably cleansed and it became easier to breathe."

As cancer spreads secretly through his body, Rusanov's cynical, *arriviste* daughter Aviette announces that Stalin's cult of personality has come under attack. Moscow has initiated a massive review of legal proceedings ("It's like an epidemic"), and betrayers are now forced to confront their victims. Rusanov's fearful response is an attack on this painful process: "It's cruel to the exiles themselves. Some of them are dead—why disturb their ghosts? Why raise groundless hopes among their relatives and perhaps a desire for revenge? Again, what does rehabilitated actually mean? It can't mean the man was completely innocent! He must have done *something,* however trivial."

As the novel, and especially the part on Rusanov progresses, the allegorical implications of army and prison spread (like the disease) to include all of Stalinist Russia: "A man dies from a tumor, so how can a





country survive with growths like labor camps and exiles?" In the hospital, as in totalitarian Russia, no one is allowed to speak the truth. Tumors are a "state secret." Despite the confessional mode of the novel, "when it came to ideology it was better to keep your trap shut." Official newspapers, distributed in the wards, are "written in fact in code," though skillful party functionaries soon learn to interpret them. Rusanov suspects the doctors of a plot to poison him; and doctors are actually put on trial in the hospital just as they were when Stalin accused them of plotting against him. Rusanov believes that public executions (like lethal x-rays) "would speedily bring complete health to our society."

Doctors, like KGB men, enjoy absolute authority over the lives of their dehumanized patients. They carry out "senseless, pointless instructions which they can't ignore on pain of losing their jobs." They "believe unquestioningly in their established methods and treatments." X-rays are used as indiscriminately as police arrests. Doctors do not know "what percentage of healthy cells [or innocent people] as compared to the diseased ones would be destroyed."

The remission of Kostoglotov's disease in the spring of 1955 coincides with the political thaw that began to take place two years after the death of Stalin. He expresses the feelings of the oppressed by publicly condemning Stalin's crimes in his argument with Shulubin. In contrast to Kostoglotov, Shulubin has sold out to political pressure, confessed "mistakes" he never made, been reduced from a professor in Moscow to a provincial librarian, participated in book burning—and has saved his life at the expense of his soul. During the purge trials, intelligent people like Shulubin, who wanted only to live, were forced to believe that "Millions of Russian soldiers . . . betrayed their country." Kostoglotov thinks "the traitors were those [like Rusanov] who wrote denunciations or stood up as witnesses." Even Lenin's widow Krupskaya failed to understand what was actually happening or lacked the courage to protest against these crimes. Other leaders preferred to die in mysterious circumstances or to commit suicide rather than confess to false crimes.

The thaw suggests the cure. The entire Supreme Court of the Soviet Union, which administered "justice" for a quarter of a century, is suddenly dismissed. Malenkov is relieved of his duties; Beria is overthrown, "falling with a tinny clang." Stalin is openly attacked. Rumors circulate that exiles are going to be released. And Kostoglotov is treated with extraordinary courtesy by the police Kommandant in Tashkent. The morally changed Podduyev expresses a major theme in the novel

when he says that if the tumor (of Stalinism) is to be cured, "suddenly drain away, dry up and die by itself . . . I suppose for that you need to have . . . a clear conscience." Political change must reflect moral change in both the people and their leaders.

At the end of the novel Kostoglotov—who as a patient was treated as a zoological specimen—is released from the hospital, improved but impotent. Before deciding whether it might be possible to share his life with Vera—who feels eternally bound to the past by the promise to her dead lover just as he is bound to the army, prison and hospital—he visits a series of symbolic animals in the Tashkent zoo. He then decides to return to exile in Kazakhstan and to his humane friends, the Kadmins. Like Vera's friend Dr. Oreshchenkov, who also loves animals, they are the moral touchstones of the novel.

The first animal Kostoglotov sees is a dignified and reflective spiral-horned mountain goat, who stands on a steep precipice and represents "the sort of character a man [like Kostoglotov] needed to get through life." By contrast the squirrel, like the oppressed proletariat, revolves in his cage at a furious pace, its heart nearly bursting. It cannot understand that " 'It's all in vain!' No, there was clearly only one inevitable way out, the squirrel's death."

The Rhesus monkey (experiments on which led to the medical discovery of the Rh factor in human blood) stands for the third type of man: the helpless and tormented political prisoner. A crudely painted sign explains his empty cage: "The little monkey that used to live here was blinded because of the senseless cruelty of one of the visitors. An evil man threw tobacco into the Macaque Rhesus's eyes." Solzhenitsyn states in an Appendix to the novel that the perpetrator of this gratuitous cruelty—who is diametrically opposed to the views expressed in Tolstoy's *What Men Live By*—"is meant to represent Stalin specifically."[24] Finally, Kostoglotov stares with hatred at a rapacious tiger with yellow eyes, whom he also associates (through his pre-Revolutionary place of exile) with Stalin.

The personal and political significance of this visit is intensified by its moral simplicity, by its characteristic combination of the obvious and the subtle. Solzhenitsyn argued, when attempting to justify the "progressive" aspects of his novel to the Secretariat of Soviet Writers in 1967, that his theme is ultimately affirmative: "life conquers death, the past is conquered by the future," and both "triumph over spiritual sorrow."[25] But his fortunate cure, marriage and children, his courageous transformation of disease and death into great art, his "seed of





hope on the very brink of the grave,"[26] must not blind us to his hero's tragic fate.

Kostoglotov's life shows that dictators, party officials, police, guards and prisoners are all trapped in the vast prison of Russia. There is no escape from cancer, despite periods of remission, just as there is no escape from the legacy of Stalinism, despite the apparent political thaw. Kostoglotov has been released by and destroyed by both prison and hospital. He survived his ordeal by cancer and is "free" to return to his place of exile. But he is no longer fit for sexual life, and must renounce love and the possibility of human happiness. *Cancer Ward* (like recent Russian history) is perhaps less life-affirming than Solzhenitsyn would have us believe, for it expresses a terrible truth: "The cells of the heart which nature built for joy die through disuse. The small place in the breast which is faith's cramped quarters remains untenanted for years and decays."[27]

[1] Quoted in B. H. Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence: In Arabia and After* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 442.

[2] Thomas Mann, "Dostoyevsky—in Moderation," in *The Short Novels of Dostoyevsky* (New York: Dial Press, 1945), p. xiv.

[3] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground,* trans. Andrew MacAndrew (New York: Signet, 1961), p. 93.

[4] Arthur Rimbaud, letter of 15 May 1871, in *Complete Works,* trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 102–03.

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 303.

[6] Thomas Mann, "Goethe and Tolstoy," *Three Essays,* trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1929), pp. 29–30.

[7] Mann, "Dostoyevsky—in Moderation," pp. xii, xv.

[8] Erich Kahler, *The Orbit of Thomas Mann,* trans. Francis Golffing (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 27.

[9] Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (New York, 1965), p. 240.

[10] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill" (1930), *Collected Essays,* ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), p. 193.

[11] There have been realistic works (Kopit's *Wings* and Cook's *Coma*), novels about doctors (*Arrowsmith* and *Doctor Zhivago*), satires on medicine (Lewis' *Tatting Hill* and Nichols' *National Health*), novels of madness (*Mrs. Dalloway* and *Tender is the Night*), diseased heroes (O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Browse's *A Gift of the Dusk*), grim death scenes (*Mastro-don Gesualdo* and *Of Time and the River*), novels about dying and death (*The Leopard* and *A Death in the Family*).

[12] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground,* pp. 90–91.

[13] Gottfried Benn, *Primal Vision,* trans. Babette Deutsch (New York, [1960]), p. 217.

[14] See Zhores Medvedev, "Getting Solzhenitsyn Straight," *New York Review of Books,* 17 May 1973, pp. 32–34; and the Feifer-Medvedev correspondence, 19 July 1973, pp. 30–31.

[15] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "The Right Hand," *Stories and Prose Poems,* trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Bantam, 1972), p. 122.

[16] Quoted in David Burg and George Feifer, *Solzhenitsyn* (New York, 1972), p. 124.

[17] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf,* trans. Harry Willetts (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 341, 362.

[18] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

[19] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Appendix" to *Cancer Ward,* trans. Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (New York: Bantam, 1969), p. 554.

[20] Iris Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers* (New York, 1980), p. 1.

[21] Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," p. 194.

[22] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 80.

[23] George Orwell, "How the Poor Die" (1945), *Decline of the English Murder* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 38.

[24] Solzhenitsyn, "Appendix" to *Cancer Ward,* p. 555.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 554.

[26] Thomas Mann, "Chekhov," *Last Essays,* trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 201.

[27] It is interesting to observe the greatly overrated Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács, in *Solzhenitsyn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), twist himself into ideological knots to avoid facing the political significance of *Cancer Ward.* He euphemistically writes of the Russia that created Gulag: "the external order is governed by a bureaucraticism that can very easily manifest itself as inhumanity" (p. 67); he casuistically limits the "total hopelessness" to "the last few years of Stalin's life" (p. 71); and, astonishingly, calls this terrible time "an historically extremely important transitional period in humanity's path to socialism" (p. 76).

Helen Muchnic's useful essay, "*Cancer Ward:* Of Fate and Guilt," in *Alexandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials,* ed. John Dunlop, Richard Haugh, and Alexis Klimoff (Belmont, Mass., 1973), more realistically emphasizes "all the glaring discrepancies between the theory of the Soviet State and the realities of Soviet life" (p. 290). Thompson Bradley's article, "Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward:* The Failure of Defiant Stoicism," in the same volume, effectively opposes Lukács' view of "the inner collapse" of Kostoglotov by emphasizing his modern Stoicism and the hope expressed in the younger generation of characters (pp. 297, 299).



# Women and Language in the Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen

HARRIET S. CHESSMAN

> "But what story *is* true? Such a pity, I sometimes think, that there should have to be any stories. We might have been happy the way we were."
>
> "Something has got to become of everybody, I suppose, Cousin Nettie."
>
> "No, I don't see why. Nothing has become of me: here I am, and you can't make any more stories out of that."[1]

Elizabeth Bowen's fiction, like much modern fiction, compels a recognition of the danger inherent in all fiction-making. Stories are, quite simply, untrue; they capture us, as they tried to capture Cousin Nettie, in their nets. Roderick's response, in this context, that "Something has got to become of everybody, I suppose," sounds weak. Yet Nettie's resistance to stories offers a problematic alternative. Nettie asserts a state of being, an essential unchangingness, inviolable by story; but what is this state of being? How is it to be defined? Who, finally, *is* "Cousin Nettie" except as this figure enters into some relationship, and so extension into the *relation* of some story?

Like all characters, Nettie literally owes her existence entirely to her author; she inhabits a story whether she wants to or not. One could say that her author gives her asylum, within the text—the text allows a space within itself for a critique of the text's own project—but it is also true that the text contains Nettie, just as the literal asylum, Wisteria Lodge, contains her. She is kept out of the larger picture. It is Roderick