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Viral Modernism

THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC AND
INTERWAR LITERATURE

Elizabeth Outka



Columbia University Press
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INTRODUCING THE PANDEMIC

This book investigates a modernist mystery: why does the deadly 1918–1919 influenza pandemic seem to make so few appearances in British, Irish, and American literature of the period? Globally, the pandemic killed between 50 and 100 million people, and the United States suffered more deaths in the pandemic than in World War I, World War II, and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq—combined.¹ In Britain, while more died in World War I, a third of the population, or ten million people, caught the flu, and at least 228,000 died, making it, as the historian Mark Honigsbaum observes, “the greatest disease holocaust that Britain . . . has ever witnessed.”² Ireland alone lost 23,000 people, far outstripping the 5,000 deaths from the better-known civic political violence between 1916 and 1923.³ The pandemic also had profound effects on writers and artists: Guillaume Apollinaire and Gustav Klimt died; D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Anne Porter, the poet H.D., and Edvard Munch barely survived; W. B. Yeats nursed his pregnant wife through her almost fatal brush with the virus; and Nella Larsen “worked seven days a week” nursing patients through the outbreak.⁴ Thomas Wolfe lost his brother, T. S. Eliot feared his brain was damaged by his case of the flu, and Virginia Woolf’s initial scoffing at the pandemic’s danger turned into a profound reflection on illness. Given these effects and the period in which they occurred, it is equally astonishing that the flu is rarely considered in modernist scholarship.⁵

Viral Modernism investigates this conspicuous literary and critical silence, analyzing how our assumptions about modernism, modernity, and the interwar period in Anglo-American culture change when we account for the pandemic's devastation. The era's viral catastrophe has been hidden since its arrival, drowned out by its overwhelming scope, by the broader ways outbreaks of disease are often muted, and by the way the human-inflicted violence of the time consumed cultural and literary attention. Reading for the pandemic offers a case study in how certain types of mass death become less "grievable" (in Judith Butler's formulation) than others, with deaths in the pandemic consistently seen as less important or politically useful.⁶ The millions of flu deaths didn't (and don't) count as history in the ways the war casualties did, and *Viral Modernism* examines how and why such erasures happen. When we fail to read for illness in general and the 1918 pandemic in particular, we reify how military conflict has come to define history, we deemphasize illness and pandemics in ways that hide their threat, and we take part in long traditions that align illness with seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death. More specifically, this book reveals how the terrain of modernism—and modernist studies—changes when we start seeing the pandemic's effects, altering assumptions about death and sacrifice; shifting enemies, threats, and targets; and changing the calculus of risk and blame between the home front and the front line.

Despite the pandemic's seeming disappearance, its traces are everywhere in the literature and the culture, and this instructive tension lies at the heart of the book. All the reasons for the erasure—from the war's dominance to the invisible quality of this viral threat to the difficulties of representing illness—are intrinsic to the pandemic's literary representations, paradoxically captured in gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, and hidden bodies. Recovering the pandemic in the literature requires recognizing these traces and seeing their spectral quality as inherent to a tragedy that fundamentally differed from the war's more obvious manifestations. If we know what to look for, the literature of the era emerges as particularly adept at representing the pandemic's particular qualities and its vast yet hidden presence. The pandemic's very instantiation was often one of atmosphere, of bodily sensations, and of affective shifts, and its threat was literally microscopic. The war, by contrast, was easier to see, with demarcated roles for soldiers and civilians and events that unfolded in a realm accustomed to

visibility: male contests of strength and power. Certainly the literature at the time made the war a central focus. Yet this literature (and, as I detail, especially modernist literature) also excelled at representing the pandemic's spectral presence and the changes it produced on the streets, in domestic spaces, within families, and in the body. These realms of experience—the sensory, the atmospheric, and the affective—are often precisely the realms left out of written histories but infused into memories, poems, and novels. While the national governments at the time remained invested in structuring the moment around the war, literature became an outlet for alternative frames, offering places to “see” the private, endlessly repeated horror of a Grim Reaper that stalked silently and stealthily. As we reread texts as familiar as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waste Land* through the lens of the pandemic, metaphors of modernism take on new meanings: fragmentation and disorder emerge as signs of delirium as well as shrapnel; invasions become ones of microbes and not only men; postwar ennui reveals a brooding fear of an invisible enemy.

Establishing the pandemic's importance alters not only the metaphors but also the contours of modernism and how we read it. The pandemic is a hidden force that has been there all along, exerting weight and influence. When we learn to see the effects of this force, a new interpretive landscape emerges. Illness and the body become more central, with iconic texts articulating the rippling and hard-to-capture effects that an invading virus produces within the physical body and in the body politic. The war shifts from the central source of horror and tragedy to a paired event of mass death, its memorialization bringing the war's missing into view while obscuring bodies fallen in the pandemic. New forms of violence—an internal corruption, a miasmatic enemy, an invisible weapon, a spreading contagion—become foils to the more visible violence of war. The very avoidance of the pandemic fundamentally shapes the period and thus changes how we read it: the virus becomes the ultimate form of Yeats's “mere anarchy,” an invisible power without human agency and outside all control. When we recognize the terror and subsequent evasion that such a threat produced, modernism's indirect qualities emerge as subterranean echoes of the pandemic's horrors and the very ways these horrors go underground.