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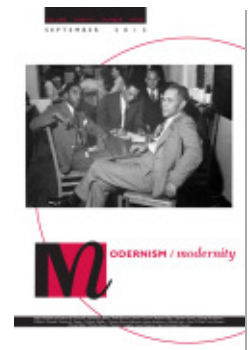
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*Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women's Narratives  
of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic* by Jane Elizabeth Fisher  
(review)

Cheryl Hindrichs

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606 contributes to the recent project to draw out transnational linkages between these syndicated modern feminine types with much detail, diversity, and applied creative analysis.

### Note

1. Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeline Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 50; hereafter cited in the text as “W.”

***Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women’s Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic.* Jane Elizabeth Fisher. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xii + 262. \$90.00 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Cheryl Hindrichs, Boise State University**

Virginia Woolf’s 1926 essay “On Being Ill” questions why illness has failed to feature as a prime theme of literature alongside love, battle, and jealousy. Jane Elizabeth Fisher’s invaluable book lays the groundwork for understanding how the twentieth-century novel has not been, as Woolf suggested, “devoted to influenza” (74). The tone of Woolf’s question takes on new dimensions when one contrasts the scope of the 1918 influenza pandemic and the scope of the First World War, which has certainly framed our readings of twentieth-century literature and modernism. Compared to the estimated nine million that died in the war’s four years, current estimates are “that the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic killed at least 50 million worldwide and probably closer to 100 million” (14). The sources of this silence are twofold. On the one hand, Fisher argues, reading and writing about an event as traumatic as the pandemic would be difficult for survivors; on the other, as Woolf predicted, the novel devoted to influenza would defy conventional literary expectations. By analyzing how the pandemic was suppressed in literature between the wars and has now become a usable “historical trauma” for contemporary writers (37), Fisher’s text carries out its important task: namely, examining the “complex processes of repression and recollection” in literature and history that have made the 1918 influenza pandemic “absent, invisible, or underinterpreted” until the last decade (1). Fisher’s work is important because it provides a foundation for redressing the pandemic’s absence from literary criticism of modernism; a third source of its invisibility, I suggest, lies in critics’ lack of a paradigm for recognizing its presence.

Fisher’s prologue and first chapter are essential reading: the questions raised inaugurate a new paradigm for rereading modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, a paradigm that Fisher extends to the rewritings of that moment that have begun to proliferate in recent decades (extensive footnotes document this trend, which ranges from popular memoir to children’s literature to postmodern fiction). The first four chapters focus on literary narratives that link war and the pandemic and portray a dynamic development in gendered identity. Fisher generally eschews theorizing a relationship between modernist modes of writing and the influence of the pandemic, but her analysis of the empowering vision that illness creates in these novels certainly invites such a consideration. Her compelling, chapter-length close readings of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Willa Cather’s *One of Ours*, Katherine Anne Porter’s “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” and Alice Munro’s “Carried Away” reveal in each a female *flâneur*, a “figure fitted in (figurative) mourning; by experiencing the shocks of modernity, she becomes a hero(ine), if not permanently a convalescent,” demonstrating a “dynamism” her male counterparts lack (27).

In a few instances, the pull of the war or other narratives—in particular, a recurring preoccupation with Joan of Arc that is less convincing than her analysis of the women writers' use of Saint Sebastian imagery—distract from Fisher's otherwise persuasive examination of "vision" and gender destabilization as a consequence of the pandemic. Fisher analyzes these tropes in contemporary works by Alice Munro and Ellen Bryant Voigt in the fifth chapter, arguing that they portray the same gender destabilization but deny their characters "the possibility of positive transformation" (38). Munro's 1991 story, published well after the epidemic (as was "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," published in 1939—a point Fisher could consider), bears strong thematic continuities with the earlier works; in contrast, Voigt's sonnet sequence *Kyrie* is the only poetry discussed and receives the most attention to the relationship between innovative form and content. In her last chapter, Fisher examines late-twentieth-century Nigerian novels about the 1918 pandemic, Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and, very briefly, Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds*, showing how the dominance of the First World War is supplanted by "indigenous aspects of African culture (kinship slavery, tribal warfare)" (177). Achieving the transnational inclusivity new modernist studies has aspired to, Fisher's dual focus on influenza's empowering vision and its confounding of conventional gender identities enables her to connect seemingly disparate works while also making important distinctions. This focus on laying the foundations of a broad historical content and context for reading the pandemic allows Fisher to contrast Nigeria's "vibrant oral tradition," which enabled the pandemic to survive "in African popular memory more coherently," with Western societies' repression of it from public memory until only recently (178).

The implications for further and more comparative study of the relationship of gender, war, and illness are particularly relevant for modernist literary criticism. Although Fisher suggests a strong relationship between modernist innovation and works that take up "the visionary possibilities of illness" in her chapter on *Mrs. Dalloway*, her concern is primarily with the content of Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (37). The chapter concludes by noting that even "Cather apparently could become a protomodernist" when handling the destabilizing effects of the pandemic and war; the form, "literary modernism," is thus dictated by the content, modernity (70). It is precisely this connection, the content infecting the form, that deserves a fuller consideration in modernist studies; is it not possible that physical illness serves as a catalyst to modernist innovation, and if so, why has it not been a prime theme of modernist criticism?

As Fisher argues, the swift, ubiquitous slaughter of the pandemic and its undermining of medical authority made it "invisible" to the paradigms of conventional portrayals of the war that dominated social and historical narratives about the period (6). I would further suggest that the importance of modernist literature lies in its attempts to articulate the silences marking the trauma of the pandemic, particularly in the work of writers like Woolf who, in "On Being Ill," named language's poverty and the influence of conventional plots in displacing illness as a subject of fiction. The 1918 pandemic's traces appear throughout postwar literature, but it is its absence from our historical narratives that has made it invisible. As sociologists and scientists today exhume the pandemic, reacquainting ourselves with this history will not only illuminate marginalized texts but will suggest new readings of canonical ones. For example, scientists now recognize the interwar epidemic of "sleepy sickness" (*encephalitis lethargica*) as a complication of the influenza pandemic; this illness, virtually unknown today, offers a new context for reading the protagonist's mysterious and transformative seven-day sleep in Woolf's *Orlando*. In *The Post Card*, Jacques Derrida identifies another significant trace in Sigmund Freud's addition of a footnote to "On the Pleasure Principle," one that describes the "fort-da" game and evokes, without naming her, his beloved daughter who died from influenza. The suppression and expression of that grief—Freud denied claims that his theory of the death drive was influenced by Sophie's death, yet he inscribes her absence in a footnote about her son's mastery of loss—is symptomatic of the influenza pandemic's absent presence in modernist literary criticism.

Framing her argument with Judith Herman's trauma studies, Fisher suggests that the "return of the repressed"—the contemporary scientific and creative focus on the 1918 pandemic—has been possible only when culture has felt a degree of mastery over the possibility of another pandemic "in the form of prevention by vaccination or containment and treatment by the use of antiviral and antibiotic drugs" (21). Fisher's useful analysis of historians' accounts of the pandemic shows how such mass death baffles attempts to communicate it; even statistical descriptions "take on a hyperbolic tone" and risk "sounding unreliable or obsessive" (14). By undermining medical and governmental authority, the pandemic has made ineffective historians' attempts to narrate its history using tropes of the heroic warrior (a particularly egregious example is John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*). I suggest that it is precisely the challenges of this resistance to conventional narrativization that attracted modernist authors. It is certainly understandable that T. S. Eliot's speaker would sound a bit "unreliable or obsessive" when pondering the many undone dead flowing over London Bridge, especially when one takes into consideration a pandemic in which the healthy fell so quickly that family members resorted to burying loved ones in their gardens, keeping the dog far hence, mind you.

***The Years*. Virginia Woolf. Anna Snaith, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. cxii + 870. \$140.00 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Elizabeth F. Evans, University of Notre Dame**

There is some tension in the notion of a scholarly edition of a book by Virginia Woolf. As editor Anna Snaith and series editors Jane Goldman and Susan Sellers separately remark, Woolf valued independence in reading and was wary of both authorial and editorial guidance. But Anna Snaith's work in her new edition of *The Years* steadfastly avoids a didactic stance, preferring to provide multiple possibilities rather than to assert an authoritative text or interpretation. The result is a glorious abundance of information, some closely tied to Woolf's life and works, some garnered in a more widely cast net.

A dive into this meticulously researched edition is not for the fainthearted. Of all her works, *The Years* was the one that troubled Woolf most and longest. From conception to publication, it occupied the better part of six years and rested upon more than twenty years of reading. This was the last novel Woolf saw to publication, and it was also her most expansive. The narrative takes in fifty years of British history, beginning in 1880 at the height of Victorian imperialism and the patriarchal home—the two always interconnected for Woolf—and continuing through the first three decades of the twentieth century with its swath of political, technological, and ideological changes (one of Snaith's contributions in this volume is to establish definitively the temporal setting of the final section, ambiguously named "Present Day," as 1931–33). With its complicated and sometimes recursive composition history and its density of historical, geographical, and cultural allusions, *The Years* provides plenty of fodder for the attentive editor, and Snaith is certainly that. The book is mammoth, approaching one thousand pages when one includes all of the introductory and note matter. There are 143 pages of explanatory notes that range individually in length from a single line to over a page. These are often fascinating reading, as Snaith excavates the rich associations of a word or phrase. A 219-page textual apparatus identifies variants from the copy text, the first British edition, which was published in March 1937 by the Hogarth Press. Variants are drawn from all other extant states of the text, from proofs to published editions, including several versions of galley proofs, two sets of page proofs, and the first American edition (though not from the holograph or typescript manuscripts). Forty-nine pages of textual notes identify important shifts between variant texts and significant passages in