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*Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar
Literature* by Elizabeth Outka (review)

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—Ian Miller

Elizabeth Outka. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 344 pp. Paperback, \$35.00.

The eerily prescient publication of *Viral Modernism*—a book that interrogates the conspicuous absence of direct references to the pandemic of 1918 in British and American interwar literature—mere months before the outbreak of COVID-19 could be read as a fortuitous coincidence. But as Elizabeth Outka warns in her chilling coda, scientists and researchers have been telling us for years that “we are not ready for the next severe global pandemic, which—as they also remind us—is most assuredly coming” (254). Outka could not have known as she wrote those words how soon the COVID pandemic would overwhelm the world. However, this book is not simply a precursor to the scholarship on the history of pandemics and their literary manifestations that will undoubtedly follow the present pandemic: it is instead part of a substantial subfield of health humanities scholarship that emerged in the early 2000s and focuses on historical and literary accounts of the 1918 flu pandemic. The question that underlies much of this scholarship is why, despite the fact that the flu killed between 50 and 100 million people, it is not directly referenced in the literature of that period.

Viral Modernism succeeds in remapping modernist studies by placing the pandemic at its center, a move that requires a reframing of certain assumptions about this period, such as why the lives lost in war were more grievable than those lost to illness.¹ Outka’s point is that the pandemic dead were ungrievable because they could not be made meaningful through the guise of sacrificial death, and therefore were not politically useful. *Viral Modernism* provides a crucial frame for

literary and cultural studies more widely by reading modernist texts and films through two inventive tropes: “miasma” and “viral resurrection.” The first of these, miasma, focuses on the “spectral realities” of the pandemic’s “absent presence” in novels like *Mrs. Dalloway* or poems like “The Second Coming” (5–6). “Viral resurrection” describes the embodied illness apparent in the resurfaced corpses, zombies, and disfigured bodies of literature and culture in this period, which highlight the pandemic’s lasting effects on survivors who often experienced a feeling of living death. Outka’s larger point here is that analyzing an experience of illness that is “simultaneously widespread and hidden” offers a model for the recuperation of voices that have been ignored because “the viral, dust-like form at the heart of the story was itself invisible and silent” (37).

Viral Modernism is effectively divided into an introductory chapter and three parts: one focused on the realist novels of Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and William Maxwell; the second concentrated on major modernist writers Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats; and a final chapter addressing the pandemic in popular culture, examining spiritualism, proto-zombies, and the return of the dead in the work of Arthur Conan Doyle, H. P. Lovecraft, and Abel Gance’s film *J’accuse*. Outka’s choice of largely canonical authors might initially seem predictable, but she offers surprisingly original insights into well-known texts such as *The Waste Land*, with famous lines such as “I had not thought death had undone so many” becoming suddenly more haunting when read as a reference to flu victims.

The introductory section displays Outka’s meticulous research on the lived experiences of survivors of the virus and points to her ethical commitment to interrogating the human tendency to describe illness by using metaphors. *Viral Modernism* opens with a striking list of modernist writers whose lives were deeply impacted by the flu. Some, like Porter and D. H. Lawrence, became so ill that they barely survived, while others, like Woolf, turned her own experiences into a reflection on illness. Eliot worried about the effects the flu would have on his brain, while Yeats agonized over the condition of his pregnant wife, who also had a near-fatal encounter with the virus. Individually these references provide interesting anecdotes; together they offer a startling picture of just how deeply the virus influenced these writers. For instance, as Outka shows, Yeats developed a new conception of violence that was illness-based. Arthur Conan Doyle, whose son died as a result of the pandemic, became obsessed with the loss and turned to spiritualism in an effort to assuage his grief. In this way

Outka's readings remind us that while illness is often metaphorized into a battle or something an individual picks up or sinks into, the virus impacted daily life directly and materially. The 1918 flu, much like the COVID-19 pandemic, "did not simply unfold behind the closed doors of homes and hospitals; public life was visibly changed" (15). The constant sight of coffins and funerals, along with the sounds of tolling bells, which rang in memory of those who fell victim to the flu, are details inscribed in the minds of those who experienced it firsthand—but they are also, as Outka notes, quintessential images of modernist literature.

More than a series of morbid images, the flu had real and lasting effects on the bodies of its victims, leaving survivors with damaged lungs, hearts, and nerves. It also left wider society with an enduring sense of grief and a desire to connect with or recover the dead, a desire Outka aligns with the rise of spiritualism, but also of zombie movies.

Despite the obvious link between these experiences of illness and literary works like Woolf's *On Being Ill* or Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, few critics have commented on the influence of the pandemic on literature of this period. Outka explains that this absence can be at least partly attributed to the difficulties of writing and speaking about the experience of illness, which disrupts one's sense of self. Using more recent illness narratives such as Kathlyn Conway's *Beyond Words* and Rita Charon's foundational work on narrative medicine to support her points, Outka applies health humanities approaches, which weave together medicine and narrative, to the influenza of 1918 in order to explore how this sickness deprived victims of their sense of self, fractured the boundaries of their being, and in this sense resisted "incorporation into an understandable narrative" (30).² It is this very resistance, Outka argues, that made the pandemic so well suited to the largely plotless work of modernist writers.

This argument runs the risk of equating form with content, particularly as Outka sees the plotlessness of the modernist novel as a "ready-made structure for representing illness's non-narrative characteristics" (31). And, since the only novel Outka discusses that could be considered plotless is *Mrs. Dalloway*, this point needs further development—especially because at other times Outka suggests that novelistic plots provide order to the chaotic experience of illness. *Viral Modernism's* approach could indeed be criticized for reducing modernist experimentation down to reflections or responses to the disorienting effects of widespread disease and the loss of life. However, Outka is careful in her framing and explains that these depictions, which range

from the “miasmatic atmospheres to walking dead to bells to corpses to uncertain burial to linguistic fragments that read as delirium,” do not always “reflect the pandemic or only reflect the pandemic” (244). Still, she insists, “knowing the outbreak’s sensory and affective history changes our sense of the wellspring from which interwar literature arose” (244). Thus, while US writers like Cather, Porter, Maxwell, and Wolfe write in a realist style that details “the sights and psychological impact and tensions of the moment” (97), the more well-known modernist writers based in the UK and Ireland analyzed in part two—Woolf, Eliot and Yeats—write in a more fragmentary and less linear style, registering the more immediate trauma of the pandemic and the “emotional pieces that have yet to be formed into a coherent story” (99). Certainly, Outka’s close readings of most of these texts are utterly convincing as they shift the frame of modernism from war and empire to one of bodies and illnesses, both physical and mental, and therefore open the possibilities for other voices to be heard. However, while it is striking that Yeats’s “The Second Coming” is the only work Outka discusses that was composed during the pandemic and was written directly after witnessing the suffering of a loved one, the reading of the poem as a “concentrated, twenty-two-line version of pandemic-level violence and the dissolving order it brings” is not entirely convincing since there are few direct textual references to the pandemic in the poem (169). Nevertheless, Outka’s reading of the influence the pandemic had on Yeats’s conception of violence that could be felt viscerally as “delirium, disintegration, madness and terror” will certainly challenge more literal interpretations of Yeats’s poetry that posit this violence as the result of war and revolution (195).

The final section details the pandemic’s influence on popular culture by focusing on spiritualism as a way of achieving contact with the pandemic dead and zombies as a way of reviving those lost. Outka sees the use of zombies in pandemic writing as emerging from the Lovecraftian strand of viral zombies rather than the more racially problematic Seabrookean strand reappropriated from Haitian folklore.³ Spiritualism and viral zombies offer Outka two “distinct ways to reframe [the pandemic’s] losses within clear narrative structures, granting alternatives to the grim ambiguity of the literary accounts discussed in parts 1 and 2” (199). While spiritualism presented material evidence of the presence of the deceased, zombies offered consolation through expressions of “ravenous guilt and anger that are then securely reburied” (200).

Treading territories familiar to modernist scholars, Outka risks replacing the frame of war with the frame of pandemic. However, Outka nimbly resists that tendency, instead challenging readers to see beyond the memorials to the war dead in order to reckon with less visible, but no less painful, losses. In this sense, *Viral Modernism* offers readers a method for uncovering lost and forgotten illness narratives through close readings of literary texts from the period that are not ostensibly about illness but which include depictions of maimed and suffering bodies, corpses, hallucinations, and altered mental states. Ending the book with a much-needed call to amend the American health care system in order to better prepare for a global pandemic, Outka reminds readers of the inherent value of novelistic narratives: to make visible the invisible, shaping the bodily experiences of illness and viral threat into linguistic tangibility.

NOTES

1. Outka draws on Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* here in suggesting that the lives of precarious individuals are often forgotten or seen as ungrievable because they were not recognized as being alive in the first place.

2. See Conway, *Beyond Words*, and Charon, *Narrative Medicine*.

3. William Seabrook's account of his travels in Haiti in *The Magic Island* (1929) introduced American readers to Zombies but could also be read as a form of cultural appropriation.

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