



## Representations of the 1918 pandemic in poetry

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**Abstract:** The Spanish flu does not have a powerful hold on cultural memory. As an illness, it erases the collective suffering; as a virus, it offers a degenerate body. This essay will explore representations of the 1918 pandemic in poetry by using three poems: Voigt's Kyrie, Eliot's The Wasteland and Williams's Spring and All. The impact of the flu on these three poems not only consists of its material effects, but also resides in its metaphoric potential. Influenza provides an entry into modernist discourses across disciplines - literature, science, sociology, medicine - that are concerned with reconceptualising bodies of all kinds. The poems discussed in this paper echo the narrative of survivors from both the war and the flu who felt stranded in a state of existence describable as a "living death", a state in which one was not dead, but not quite alive, either. Surrounded by so many who were dying, the living often felt only half alive. The pervasive feeling of being on the threshold of life and death, and of confrontation between life and death, captures this particular historical moment on both literal and metaphorical levels. These poems also serve as contributors to modernist conceptions of the drudgery of everyday life during a pandemic and represent a factual description of what it was like to remain alive in 1919. They capture in their very silences both acknowledged horrors and horrors that remain unspoken.

**Key words:** 1918 pandemic, Health humanities, Medical humanities, Modernist literature, Poetry

## Introduction

Catherine Belling averred that "The memories of influenza, it seems, are surreal, and to write them is to write nonsense or dreams or poetry. Perhaps this meant that even those who might vividly describe injuries to the body (such as those caused by war) would have found themselves incapable of representing to

others the experience of having the flu".[1] The turmoil caused by influenza's fever and its hallucinations, and the incredible pain and difficulty of breathing sapped away both mental and physical energy, leaving little room for self-expression through art or literature. Estimates of the death toll for the 1918 pandemic range between 20 and 100 million [2], yet with flu one did not die in the

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service of a great cause – one simply died. “English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache”, Virginia Woolf wrote in her 1926 essay “On Being Ill”. [3] Woolf had witnessed the Spanish flu’s impact first hand. On 20 October 1918, she penned in her diary “we are...in the midst of a plague unmatched since the Black Death”. [4] Later in her 1925 book *Mrs Dalloway*, set in the aftermath of World War I, she described the lasting trauma of war and of the illness that succeeded it. “This late age of the world’s experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears” [5], she reflected. “Tears and sorrows, courage and endurance, a perfectly upright and stoical bearing”. [5]

Unlike the Great War that preceded it but also intersected with it, the Spanish flu does not possess a powerful hold on cultural memory. Scholars suggest that the depravity of the war significantly aided the spread of the disease, while others have argued that the hastened end of the war (and subsequent peace treaty) was influenced by the pandemic. [6] As Paul Fussell observes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “the war that was called Great, invades the mind...” [7] and that “war detaches itself from its normal location in chronology and its accepted set of causes and effects all pervading, both internal and external at once, the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century”. [7] The “Great Influenza”, it seems, made for a far less compelling story. [8]

This essay will explore representations of the 1918 pandemic in poetry by using three poems: Voigt’s *Kyrie*, Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and Williams’s *Spring and All*. The impact of the flu on these three poems not only consists of its material effects, but also resides in its metaphoric potential. Influenza provides a platform for interdisciplinary discourse - literature, science, sociology, medicine – and serves

as a conceptual framework. [9] As an illness, it erases the collective suffering; as a virus, it offers a degenerate body. “Its figurative role, then, parallels other facets of modernity that cast doubt upon the integrity of units - the human subject, the family, the community - once considered natural”. [9]

## Personifying Tragedy: *Kyrie*

Ellen Bryant Voigt’s book-length sonnet sequence, *Kyrie*, remains one of the major works about the 1918 influenza pandemic. [10] Voigt’s poetry has reflected her endless quest to unite her two artistic impulses: music and story telling, and her work as a whole recites her need and “will to change”. [11] Both the settings and characters in the poems imply the local but her major concern is universal: “choice and fate, and the tension between them that constitutes human life”. [11]

Inspired by her father’s childhood as an orphan during the 1918 pandemic, Voigt wanted to portray in *Kyrie* the irony of life. She had no particular interest in the pandemic, however, it occurred to her that her father’s circumstances would resonate with many others who had survived it, its main victims having been young adults. [11]

*Kyrie* is a book-long sequence of rough, unrhymed sonnets that vary considerably in syntax and in rhetorical emphasis. Some speak in the first person, some are letters home, while others speak through the third person. To personalise the influenza pandemic of 1918, Voigt engages in various literary devices. The title, “*Kyrie*”, is derived from the Greek word “O Lord”, and the rather common name is associated with Christian prayer. The title echoes a personal prayer, and serves to symbolise the circumstances of the characters in the poems. [12]

*Kyrie* leaps from one expressive moment, caught like a snapshot, to another, eschewing but implying a connecting narrative. The individual sonnets often

achieve a muted eloquence that lends the subject a monumental solemnity:

"To be brought from the bright schoolyard into the house:  
to stand by her bed like an animal stunned in the pen:  
against the grid of the quilt, her hand seems stitched to the cuff of its sleeve - although he wants  
most urgently the hand to stroke his head, although he thinks he could kneel down that it would need to travel only inches to brush like a breath his flushed cheek, he doesn't stir: all his resolve,  
all his resources go into watching her, her mouth, her hair a pillow of blackened ferns -  
he means to match her stillness bone for bone.  
Nearby he hears the younger children cry, and his aunts like careless thieves, out in the kitchen."

The subject of the pandemic flu gives the writer good reason to wallow in coughed-up blood and bile, yet in *Kyrie*, Voigt almost entirely avoids the grotesque imagery that marks some of her earlier work. Instead, a long historical perspective overshadows and dignifies the work in a manner unavailable to the personal lyric.[12] Voigt depicts the flu epidemic as an extension of the Great War, the disease a mutated strain of the horror that had already sickened the world and weakened its resistance to death.[12] She reminds us that war changes the world forever:

"And so the armies could be done with war,  
and soldiers trickled home to study peace.  
But the old gardens grew a tough new weed,  
and the old Uves didn't fit as they had before,  
and where there'd been the dream, a stranger's face,  
and where there'd been the war, an empty sleeve".

In the second section, Voigt deals directly

with the circumstances people lived through. She writes

"You wiped a fever-brow, you burned the cloth.  
You scrubbed a sickroom floor, you burned the map,  
What wouldn't burn you boiled like apple sauce."

Her descriptions are evocative, sensual and exact. Similarly, her rhythms are controlled and taut, fitting her subject expertly. In the shorter first and third sections, where Voigt works to build a context beyond the personal, the tension slightly slackens.[12] The voices are not as distinct or gripping as those that speak of the immediate ordeal:

"Since we had no lambs  
I cut the cat's throat, Xed the door,  
And put the carcass out to draw the flies.  
I raised an upstairs window and watched them go,  
swollen, shiny, black, green-black, green-eyed,  
fleeing the house, taking the sickness with them."

The lines "Since we had no lambs, I cut the cat's throat, Xed the door," appear to be a direct reference to the Passover Ritual described during the Jewish Exile in Egypt when the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts and lintels of the house protected the household from the wrath of God which struck down "every first-born of the land, both man and beast".[13] It is also reflective of a general helplessness in the face of such a huge tragedy against which there appeared to be no effective human intervention. Pandemics lift the veil off of humankind's frailty and strike indiscriminately.[14] The overwhelming anguish produced by the death of so many in so short a time, situates the living in a vacuum with one foot in the realm of life and the other on the threshold of death. A flu death was in many ways more pointless, less understandable, less preventable, than a war death; the very fact

that the mass casualties did not fit within familiar structures of war mourning, that they could inspire a wide-eyed grief without any redeeming value to accept or reject, suggests that the pandemic helped fuel familiar modernist themes such as the frustrated search for meaning in death, a sense of alienation and fragmentation, and the anxiety over death's sudden and often random strikes.[9]

Through literary technique, Voigt assigns significance to everyday objects; in doing so she succeeds in capturing and portraying the individual human experience. Through the evocative use of metaphors and personification, the reader realises that death is costly. The narrator of this poem communicates clearly, through repeated metaphors and personification of the bed, how much is truly lost in death:

“This is the double bed where she'd been born,  
bed of her mother's marriage and decline,  
bed her sisters also ripened in,  
bed that drew her husband to her side,  
bed of her one child lost and five delivered,  
bed indifferent to the many bodies,  
bed around which all of them were gathered,  
watery shapes in the shadows of the room,  
and the bed frail abroad the violent ocean,  
the frightened beasts so clumsy and pathetic,  
heaving their wet breath against her neck,  
she threw off the pile of quilts – white face  
like a moon –  
and then entered straightaway into heaven.”

The sonnets launch the readers straightaway into the centre of the pandemic: “everybody's dying and there's nothing you can do”. This sense of helplessness reflects the breakdown of social order and introduces the notion of social death. Since time immemorial, social death succeeded physical death with its social aspect of death being marked by rites like funerals and wakes. Yet, if metaphorically speaking one is considered dead, or “as good as dead,” social death precedes biological death.[15] More subtly, when

others make people with life-threatening illness into objects of pity, define their social existence by their predicted death, and ignore other biopsychosocial factors, they create the conditions for social death that occurs before biological death.

While acknowledging social breakdown, Voigt strives to provide a semblance of normality to a tumultuous and terrible time by employing a formal poetic form: the sonnet. The sonnet serves as a necessary tool to convey to its readers the enormity of this human tragedy and present it with an understandable context. [9] Kyrie frames itself with readings of landscape in terms of former human presence. Like writing itself, the landscape retains only the faintest trace of what has gone before, but Kyrie commemorates the act of commemoration, and reminds us how human emotion has already reified the past.

## Death had undone so many: The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot famously conjures a threshold atmosphere in *The Waste Land*, which is “in many ways a homage to the state of the living death, though it mentions neither the war nor the flu directly”.[9] T.S. Eliot wrote *The Wasteland* during a rough time in his writing career — his marriage was failing, and both he and his wife had issues of mental health. The poem is often read as a representation of the growing disenchantment of the post-war generation. Dismissing this view, Eliot commented in 1931, “When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land*, some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed ‘the disillusion of a generation’, which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention”.[16] Critics have long considered the poem as a statement on the post war atmosphere, but the poem also captures the post pandemic atmosphere. The poem is known for its concealed meaning, particularly its subtle switch between satire and prophecy and has become the yardstick of modern literature, a

poetic counterpart to James Joyce's *Ulysses* published in the same year.[17]

Eliot knew first-hand what even a mild case of the influenza virus could do to the body and to the mind. He himself contracted influenza, and while his experience was not a serious one, he records that he “is very weak”, and his wife Vivien notes that afterwards “he is haunted by the fact that his mind is not acting as it used to do”.[19] Naturally, a range of personal and political issues feed into the despair of *The Waste Land*, but the sense of uncertainty created by the massive flu deaths is weaved into the following lines.[18,19]:

“Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William  
Street,  
... .

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him,  
crying “Stetson!  
You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
That corpse you planted last year in your  
garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this  
year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to  
men,  
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!”

Death is both remembered and hidden, both everywhere, flowing on London Bridge, and buried – but not securely.[9] Eliot may not have had the pandemic in mind as he wrote these lines, but he nevertheless evokes the atmosphere of the time, one that encompassed the sense that the dead had been so plentiful that they had overflowed the boundaries of the living. Indeed, the passage suggests not only the post-war and the post-pandemic atmosphere, but also a new kind of

threatening resurrection. The corpse planted last year remains buried, but capable of return, threatening to rise from its bed, disturbed.[8] Such imagery speaks on both a literal and figurative level. Corpses had been everywhere, often buried in mass graves, or buried without a marker, or without a coffin, or even left unburied; therefore such bodies could literally return. The corpse as memory and as body is hidden but remains near, just outside in the garden, capable of being dug. [9] On a more figurative level, we might see in a corpse the efforts undertaken during the pandemic to bury the body psychologically, to forget the flu, and to turn away from the memory of the war. On a broader level, no one knew in 1922 whether the flu would return, as virulent as ever, or whether another war with Germany would unfold. We witness here a type of modernist mourning: Eliot records the desire to push the dead away, to bury grief and move on, and at the same time he insists that the memory of these bodies will always return.[9] The issue of social death is also never far from the surface in *The Wasteland*, aided and abetted by the same imagery employed in the above lines. The lines “I had not thought death had undone so many / sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet”, particularly, reinforce a loss of social identity, social connectedness and losses associated with the defragmented body. *The Wasteland* conveys a series of losses and the devastation manifests itself in not being – that is, people.

Eliot creates a sense of lurking, of a hidden menace, of death waiting at every corner, and this threat is no way lessened by the war's end. He effectively captures how London – never part of the actual war zone – remains full of death and is far from a safe home front. As Outka explains, “to see this atmosphere as primarily fuelled by the war or modern malaise is to miss the experiential truth of the pandemic”.[9] The flu could return without warning, and this presented a real threat that produced rational anxiety. To ignore the flu in *The Waste Land* would be to perpetuate the

subtle ways the flu was evaded and silenced. Eliot participates in this muted treatment but “he also captures the shadowed quality of a trauma that is hidden in plain sight”.<sup>[9]</sup>

## William Carlos Williams’s Spring and All

Williams is a major figure in the pantheon of American poets. A doctor by profession, he was also a prolific poet and a serious thinker about poetry and language. The publication of *Spring and All* in 1923 marked his reputation as a major poet. Arguably, the life of a doctor and the life of a poet influence each other as the poet may make the doctor a more humane and altruistic ministrant to the sick. In return, the doctor influences the way a poet views the world. Like Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, *Spring and All* is saturated in an atmosphere of mortality. Williams’s first poem, titled only by number (later anthologized with the title “Spring and All”), begins without warning in a cold and unremarkable landscape.<sup>[20]</sup>

The “road to the contagious hospital” sets the scene – no hope is envisaged in this grim image of life. The cold wind driven from the northeast does not bring with it an idyllic air or hopeful introduction commonly associated with the tradition of spring poems. Williams effectively juxtaposes what he faces every day at the hospital to the lack of vitality he witnesses in spring on his way to the contagious hospital <sup>[21]</sup>. The description here is full of images of illness and death – “a cold wind”, “dried weeds, standing and fallen”, “small trees with dead brown leaves”, “under them leafless wires” <sup>[20]</sup>. Yet despite this threshold atmosphere, life still exists and although the landscape appears a “purplish” bruise, it succeeds in integrating decay with the return of life. Williams depicts in *Spring and All* a dual climate: the paradoxical sense of a re-awakening towards the end of the poem “rooted, they grip down and begin to awaken” <sup>[20]</sup> – with the pervasive sense that death is ever close, intertwined with the living. Like Eliot, Williams records the cost of being alive.

## Discussion

Two intertwined themes cross these three poems. There is a recurring sense that the threshold between life and death has become strangely permeable, and cannot easily distinguish between what is living and what is dead. During the pandemic years, death came with such little warning that the living could never feel secure. This sense of a permeable boundary between the living and the dead could also be experienced internally. <sup>[9]</sup> The poems discussed echo the narrative of survivors from both the war and the flu who felt stranded in a state of existence describable as a “living death”, a state in which one was not dead, but also not fully alive.<sup>[9]</sup> Such an experience could be felt both physically, as an after-effect of the bodily hardships of both tragedies, as well as mentally, as a psychological experience of emotional numbness. Surrounded by so many who were dying, the living often felt only half alive. This depiction of being on the threshold of life and death, and of the confrontation between life and death, captures this particular historical moment at both literal and metaphorical levels.

The pervasiveness of death in the above poems is everywhere. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot depicts the strange absence and presence of the dead body, one that clearly arises from both the war and the flu. This strange borderland between present and absent bodies mingles the experience of the civilians grieving for bodies absent and lost in the war and those lost due to the influenza.<sup>[9]</sup>

Social death pervades both Voigt’s *Kyrie* and Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. It is in part related to abandonment, where those afflicted with disease are often seen as objects of pity, defined by their illness, with the other aspects of their personhood ignored. The notion of social death takes us back in time when during medieval times, it was dramatically played out in the case of patients who were diagnosed with leprosy. *Rotha Mary Clay’s The Medieval Hospitals of England* describes how the leper is taken to church where the

priest throws dust on each of his feet, saying: “Be thou dead to the world, but alive again unto God”.[22] This ostracism is also reflected in earlier pandemics – significantly the Black Death. In Giovanni Boccaccio’s “Decameron” he writes that the idea of contagion evoked such great fear that it caused people “to shun and flee from the sick and all that pertained to them” [...] “brother forsook brother, uncle nephew and sister brother and oftentimes wife husband: [...] fathers and mothers refused to visit or tend their other children”. [23] The city was full of corpses “every day and at every hour that the amount of holy ground for burials was certainly insufficient for the ancient custom of giving each body its individual place”. No proper burials were given and “when all the graves were full, huge trenches were dug in all of the cemeteries of the churches and into them the new arrivals were dumped by the hundreds”. [23] More recently, the concept of social death for the afflicted individual has been described in the context of HIV-AIDS. Initially, AIDS activism was considered a means to resist the occurrence of social death and combat this threat.[15]

In an act of compensation to the underlying thread of social death in pandemic narratives, Elizabeth Outka’s *Viral Modernism* serves to portray the flu pandemic of 1918 and its severity detailing the death toll in rather gruesome detail.[25] Outka describes this as “a sensory and affective history of the pandemic” asserting that these details—the distinctive description of the symptoms, the sight of dead bodies piled up and the sound of church bells to mourn for the dead—illuminate “the pandemic’s fragmented traces in the literature and the larger culture”. [24]

To depict the flu, these poets had to record the gaps as well as the atmosphere that those gaps produced. Fragmentation and experimentation characterises literary modernism: such narratives are imbued with “myth and mourning and cynicism”. Emphasis is given to the untold violence which accompanied World War I and the

innovations which ensued. Conventionally, World War I is understood as the central trauma of the modernist era, but the devastating effects of the pandemic cannot be forgotten and they “must have been formatively traumatic for the lost generation of artists and authors, as well”, Outka insists. [25] Locating the flu in modernism requires more than merely adjusting our focus – it needs a special type of lens to fully understand the destruction and havoc it created.[25]

Whether or not the pandemic is recorded or addressed, it did happen, sweeping the globe with terrible devastation. Much might be gained by weaving the flu back into the cultural and emotional climate of the post war era, particularly for understanding the sheer level of grief experienced by the populace.[9] By 1919, almost everyone in Britain and America and across the globe had lost a friend, child, parent, or spouse on the battlefields, to the flu, or both. Deaths in both tragedies were usually sudden and seemed to follow no particular logic. This precarious atmosphere of mortality and the haunting presence of real and imagined corpses make their way into literature.[9]

Literature successfully captures the elements of disease that are difficult to represent. Our perception of the world depends on a healthy body and its experiences. Literature can capture the “invisible, strange conversation that happens between the body and the mind”. [26] The three poems succeed in doing exactly this. They serve as contributors to modernist conceptions of the drudgery of everyday life during a pandemic. It is perhaps uninspiring, then, that rather than offering a direct account of the flu, these poets – whether deliberately or not – evoke a climate recording how death, the corpse, and guilt pervaded the post war, post pandemic atmosphere. This disappearing act also reflects the flu’s history, echoing its early erasure, followed by its gradual restoration to the public record and imagination. Yet, regardless of their approach, these poems represent a factual description of what it was

like to remain alive in 1919, reflecting in their very silences both acknowledged horrors and horrors that remain unspoken. T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams' have embraced the flu and the pandemic in different ways; readers can witness the devastating impact the flu had on both these poets. Writing from a historical context, Ellen Bryant Voigt, although not directly involved, effectively

portrays what it is like to witness the horrors of death during the 1918 pandemic.

Works of literature will always convey and evoke a wide range of emotions. *Kyrie*, *The Wasteland*, and *Spring and All* manage to elicit the zeitgeist of the moment, and the poems are just as relevant now, beset as we are with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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