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LE CHOLÉRA

Emily Waples//

Last week, we reached a point in this pandemic that has been some eighteen months in the making: more Americans have now died of COVID-19 than of the 1918-1919 flu. I've been dreading the moment less for the fact of it than for the fanfare, anticipating the precise terms in which I

knew the news would be couched: “The United States just hit a grim milestone when it comes to the toll of the coronavirus,” the *Washington Post* announced. I imagined the headline poised to publish, suspended in draft form like the expectant obituary of some aged celebrity, awaiting the calculus of overwhelmed ICUs.

That the statistic hits as both exceptional and utterly ordinary is unsurprising; after all, we’ve had no lack of the *grim milestone*. “The pandemic marks another grim milestone,” the *Post* affirmed only the day before, offering an interactive feature to visualize the ghastly data: 1 in 500 Americans dead. “A week of grim Covid records in the U.S.,” NBC News reported last Friday, noting all-time record highs for seven-day case rates in eight states or territories. And of course, before each record, each occasion, the last. It’s *grim milestones* all the way down, punctuating pandemic reporting like so many burial plots, plot points in a narrative without end. In May 2020, *The New York Times* memorialized the “incalculable loss” with 100,000 names inked on the page: “America has reached a grim milestone in the coronavirus outbreak.” Six months later, more signposts: “Pandemic Reaches Grim Milestone as Biden Moves to Take Charge” and “Grim Milestone: U.S. Reaches 250,000 Deaths from COVID-19.” In December 2020: “Grim milestone: 1 in 1,000 Americans dead from COVID-19,” In January 2021: “Another Grim Milestone: Coronavirus Cases Top 100 Million Worldwide.” In February, at 500,000, a Presidential address: “a truly grim, heartbreaking milestone.” In April: “Three million COVID deaths is a grim milestone.” In June: “US surpasses grim milestone with 600,000 lives lost to COVID-19.”

Once we had ashes on the White House lawn. Today, 600,000 white flags flutter on the National Mall, awaiting obsolescence. And on and on.

I would say that *grim* has become our national affect, but what it captures is more like a lack thereof: the flat matter-of-factness against which we continue (499/500 of us) to live. The word itself has lost its edge, its etymology reminds us: “a weaker word than it once was,” the Old English *grimm* signifying “fierce, cruel, savage; severe, dire, painful,” diluted by the Middle Ages to “dreary, gloomy.” The OED offers seven definitions, with varying degrees of bloodlessness. *Of pain, wounds, diseases, painful or destructive conditions: Cruel, terribly severe. Now only in weakened sense. As in: stern, unrelenting, merciless; resolute, uncompromising. See also: of things personified, esp. of death. As in: Grim death, how foule and loathsome is thine image.*

By some popular accounts, the figure of the Grim Reaper emerged with the Black Death; regardless of origin, the association persists. In her contribution to Christos Lynteris’s recent edited collection on plague iconography, historian Nükhet Varlick discusses the “Gothic epidemiology” that “still defines both scholarly and popular understandings of plague,” including “iconic imagery” including the Grim Reaper (28). During the cholera pandemics of the nineteenth century, artists on both sides of the Atlantic depicted the disease as a skeletal figure, a vanquisher poised to sweep off populations with indiscriminate vigor: “grim Sir Cholera Morbus,” as one personifying poet put it (here he is also “Terrific,” “fierce,” “Coxcombical,” and “vile”). “All iconographies of death that developed,” French sociologist Bernard Paillard declared in his account of the AIDS epidemic in Marseilles, “evoke the compelling saraband that takes everyone indiscriminately. This

iconographic proliferation reveals the invincible cavalier, most often represented by an animated cadaver who kills without mercy.” And after all, Paillard continues: “The epidemic death is horror itself. It is massive, rapid, inexorable” (244).

In 1987, Australian television ran a grotesque PSA foreboding the inexorability of AIDS. “At first, only gays and IV drug users were being killed by AIDS,” an ominous voice intones as a bowling ball-wielding Grim Reaper takes aim, “but now we know every one of us could be devastated by it.” The ten-pin configuration of racked-up “innocents” topples: a blond-braided little girl, an infant, an “us” beyond the bounds of acceptable collateral (“only gays” &c). While the ad ran for only three weeks, its impact was formidable; indeed, in her 1994 book on media representations of AIDS, Deborah Lupton characterizes 1986-1988 as “The ‘Grim Reaper’ Period of AIDS Reporting,” as the figure of the Reaper became “the definitive sign of AIDS” (59).

Yet it seems that even despite the best efforts of one notorious Florida attorney, who, in May 2020, began stalking state beaches outfitted as the Grim Reaper in protest of Governor Ron DeSantis’s cavalier reopening policies—and despite the warnings from an Italian physician that same month in the *Journal of American Medical Directors*, highlighting the ravages of “the COVID Grim Reaper” for the aged population—the Reaper has not crystallized as a “definitive sign” of our times. Instead, COVID-19 in the United States seems marked by the requisite rhetoric of *grimness* itself, by the distance and affective erasure that attends the compulsion to acknowledge and name our reality as such—one way, perhaps, to avoid fully inhabiting it.

The articulation of the *grim*—that is to say, the articulation alone—resonates with the trauma-informed Anglo-American modernism Elizabeth Outka analyzes in her recent monograph on literary responses to the 1918 influenza pandemic. In reckoning with the cultural effects of influenza, *grim* is the modifier Outka mobilizes perhaps more than any other, including but not limited to: “grim realities” (76), “grim state of living death” (76), “grim realization” (86), “grim years” (103), “grim atmosphere” (127), “grim aftermath” (162), “grim conclusions” (172), “grim ambiguity” (199), “grim encounters” (222), “grim conditions” (228), “grim images” (252), etc. It is as if *grimness* is the only rubric under which the prolonged event of the pandemic can unfold.

But I am weary of the repetition compulsion, of *grim* and its awful echoes, *grit* and *grin*. I am weary, too, of the meaninglessness of the *milestone*, of tragedy meted out in so many arbitrary demarcations, of the stock-taking every ten, then hundred thousand bodies. What might it mean to embrace the *grimm* in its more archaic sense: to live within, and not merely amid, a terrible severity?

Cover Image: “Le choléra.” Wikimedia Commons.

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