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Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*: Images of Philanthropy in Times of Crisis

Abstract

Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year" has challenged readers who want to categorize the work. It is written as a journal of a plague survivor and has appeared to some as a factual account of what the narrator saw and to others who see it as a work of fiction, the consensus of most readers. But for both kinds of readers, the narrator is central to their experience of the novel. Although representing himself as a simple recorder of events with an occasional reflection included, the narrator becomes for readers a complex and compelling character. Some of his most fascinating facets emerge as responses to the plague and the conflicts he addresses as he encounters situations that require his help. His reactions to these opportunities for philanthropic acts constitute a pattern of moments for the narrator, and for his readers, to reflect on how to help in a time of crisis.

Keywords:
Narrative Strategy, Plague Accounts, Moral Choices, Philanthropic Acts

Daniel Defoe lived and wrote in an age that saw the emergence of a public sphere that created a need for access to information about matters of social, political, and cultural concern to that public. Defoe tried a series of enterprises before settling on journalism and pamphlet writing to earn his living. In 1722 he published *Due Preparations for a Plague*, a set of recommendations for citizens to survive a plague. *Due Preparations* is a didactic piece and grounds much of its advice in religious beliefs and practices. For most modern readers it appears as serious, but plodding, and not likely to move many citizens to action. Defoe followed up later that year with *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a fictionalized journal of a plague survivor, and it has had a much greater impact then and now due to Defoe's skill at writing in the emerging genre of the novel.

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* offers an extremely realistic and convincing portrayal of life in a city gripped by bubonic plague. Indeed, Defoe's contribution to the early development of the novel is his commitment to presenting realistic fictions as he does in *Robinson Crusoe, Colonel Jack*, and *Moll Flanders*. Until early in the twentieth century many readers regarded it

as nonfiction.[1] The narrator, identified only as "H.F.," compels the attention of modern readers because they recognize that his position as operating with both the somewhat scientific perspectives he develops during his stay in London, and his religious assurance that a providential God will direct the right outcome for him whatever it may be, echoes the uncertainty that characterizes their own lives. What unites the modern reader and the narrator is the uncertainty both face in dealing with a catastrophic event and the need to make the right decisions in a crisis.

A crisis such as a plague, an earthquake, or a violent storm offers an occasion for, and a perspective on philanthropic activity. A crisis threatens and disrupts the lives of individuals and communities, and, in that highly charged space, all parties come up against many of the fundamental truths about themselves and their communities. Individuals must always see to their safety and survival, but how they respond as they turn toward their community creates moments for philanthropic actions. *A Journal*, especially in the figure of the narrator, focuses on those moments of committing to acting for the good of others and for the community as a whole. Defoe uses the narrator as a lens for examining, among other things, the experience of facing a huge crisis and making the constant set of extraordinary decisions inevitable in a crisis.

Critical treatments of *A Journal* have over time noted the tension between the focus on survival and self-sufficiency and H.F.'s impulse to stay in touch with his fellow citizens and help them when he can. He also, as noted below, announces to the reader his motive for writing the piece as an attempt to help others who at some later time might find themselves facing the terrible experience of dealing with a plague. Two important studies in the 1970s offered competing perspectives on the novel and set the tone for much subsequent critical discussion of *A Journal*. Everett Zimmerman suggested that the figure of the narrator at the end surviving the plague and promoting a positive vision for the value of self-sufficiency is Defoe's answer to facing a crisis.[2] Maximillian E. Novak, on the other hand, suggested that the city of London and its citizens, who arose resilient and strengthened by the crisis, and maintained their community throughout are the lesson readers should take from the novel.[3] A more recent critic, Peter Degabriele, argues that *A Journal* presents a need for a space between survival through isolation and a secure place in a state-determined civil society:

> The novel insists, then, that neither the social contract as the prescribed form of public relations, nor the withdrawal into privacy and self-sufficiency from all social relations can eliminate the necessity of an intimate and unguaranteeable encounter with an other. Defoe's novel

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1 For a full treatment of the historicity and fictionality of A *Journal of the Plague Year*, see Bastian, Frank. "Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Reconsidered." *The Review of English Studies* 16, no. 62 (1965): 151-173.

2 Everett Zimmerman, "H.F.'s Meditations: *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *PMLA* 87 (1972), 417-423

3 Maximillian E. Novak, "Defoe and the Disordered City," *PMLA* 92, 1977, 241-52

> insists that neither the state, as envisioned by Hobbes, nor the individual, as envisioned by so many historians and critics of the novel, are secure bulwarks against the encounter.[4]

Degabriele argues that the novel ultimately depicts a space outside the dichotomy of state and individual that enables relations among individuals to establish bonds and mutual responsibilities, a space within which self-sufficient individuals can engage with others for mutual benefits and personal attachments. Such a space encourages interactions recognizable as philanthropic activity.

The reader of *A Journal* is drawn into the narrative by H.F.'s careful establishment of his credibility by writing in a format, the journal, that requires its writer to be direct and forthright. The decision to publish presumably may come later, but the actual writing seems in the moment and without consideration of audience. Defoe works hard to create credibility and the sense that the narrator is just writing as events occur, but he also complicates the narrator's persona by the narrator's announced wish that his journal will be of use to readers who might benefit from his experiences and his advice on surviving a plague:

> I have set this particular [the decision to stay in London] down so fully, because I know not but it may be of Moment to those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same Distress, and to the same Manner of making their Choice and therefore I desire this Account may pass with them, rather for a Direction to themselves to act by, than a History of my actings, seeing it may not be of one Farthing value to them to note what became of me.[5]

Defoe offers a narrator who seems to be straightforward in his recording of events and sincere in his wish to help readers. H.F. records the events around him and offers his reflections on these entries, but always with an eye on providing lessons for his readers. That advice begins with help in responding to the need for survival and his evolving understanding of how individuals can avoid the plague, but he increasingly turns his attention to how groups of those individuals can help each other and how the greater community can become resilient enough to emerge from the crisis, perhaps even stronger than before the crisis began.

The usefulness of *A Journal* as a help to others was part of its original intention and a significant part of the philanthropic themes recognizable throughout the novel. In 1720 bubonic plague had broken out in Marseilles and was expected to arrive in England in late 1721 or early 1722. The Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, who had worked closely with Defoe in producing political pamphlets in the previous decade, asked Defoe to write something that

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4 Peter Degabriele, "Intimacy, Survival, and Resistance: Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *ELH* 77, no. 1(Spring, 2010) 1-23

5 Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9. All subsequent quotations from *A Journal* will be from this edition.

would convince Londoners to prepare for the arrival of the plague and plan to survive the onslaught. Walpole was preparing a bill to require infected people to quarantine in their houses and knew it would be highly unpopular. In its origins, then, *A Journal* is aimed at creating a public good.[6] Defoe's careful attention to engaging the reader and convincing them that the narrator is trustworthy and knowledgeable builds the reader's confidence in the advice and the likelihood that *A Journal* will have its desired impact.

Defoe's focus in *A Journal* extends beyond advice on survival for individuals to offering models of good citizenship with abundant stories of Londoners helping others, sometime at great peril to themselves. H.F. repeatedly commends the civil authorities for their readiness to stay on in the plague to carry out their duties as well as the carefulness and integrity of those acts of civil responsibility. H.F., who is very careful to protect himself in his occasional forays out into the city, represents a complex version of someone doing good sometimes, but also keeping a safe distance from the danger. Defoe complicates his narrator as more than an exemplar of good behavior. He shows the reader the difficult time the narrator has in shaping his own responses to the suffering his fellow citizens are facing. One image captures the narrator's complex response to the plague: H.F. in his lodgings, watching out the window the progress of the plague and the effects it is having on the citizenry in the street below. H.F. tells the reader about the early effects of the plague in his neighborhood and explains his somewhat unique position:

> "…I cannot speak positively of these Things; because these were only the dismal Objects which represented themselves to me as I look'd thro' my Chamber Windows (for I seldom opened the casements) while I confin'd my self within Doors, during that most violent rageing of the Pestilence;" (90)

Windows afford him a view of the plague's effects but protect him from actual contact. He is deeply interested in the plague itself and the people affected by it, but that interest cannot turn into action while he stays inside. The difference between feeling sympathy and taking action is central to approaching philanthropic issues; H.F.'s isolated physical position introduces the complex relationship between his deep interest in the effects the plague is having and his removed presence in dealing with it. H.F. staying protected within his lodgings shows him taking care of himself first and foremost. His narrative up to this point has focused primarily on the situations surrounding the advance of the plague across neighborhoods toward him and not very many encounters with other people.

H.F.'s isolation behind his windows parallels the isolation of infected people quarantined behind the doors of their houses. He devotes extensive attention

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6 See Manuel Schonhorn's treatment of *A Journal* as more than a "simple and narrowly conceived defense of the quarantine measures" and his argument that Defoe has constructed a celebration of the values and resilience of an earlier England. Manuel Schonhorn, "Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Topography and Intention." *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 76 (1968): 387-402.

to the laws that required quarantine and the enforcement of the laws, as well as the many different arrangements quarantined people had to make to support themselves while behind their doors. Isolation becomes a theme throughout the early parts of the novel. When H.F. does venture out into the streets, he does encounter people in distress and, although with much hesitation at first, helps them as best he can. H.F.'s relationship with the reader shifts from being only a guide to the aspects and elements of a plague, to someone who can suggest what demands the plague makes on a person's conscience and how to address those moral responsibilities.

The narrator, driven he says by his curiosity, does go out to see the effects of the plague. His response to what he sees in these forays is heartfelt and he expresses how much he wishes he could share with the reader the actual depths of the suffering he encounters:

> I wish I could repeat the very Sound of those Groans, and of those Exclamations that I heard from some poor dying Creatures, when in the Hight of their Agonies and Distress; and that I could make him that read this hear, as I imagine now I hear them, for the Sound seems still to Ring in my Ears. . . If I could but tell this Part, in such moving Accents as should alarm the very Soul of the Reader, I should rejoice that I had recorded those Things, however short and imperfect. (90)

Defoe presents H.F. as both engaged deeply by the plight of Londoners and protective of his own safety throughout. Like his ability to hold seemingly contradictory views on the origin and meaning of the plague, H.F., and perhaps Defoe, represents the difficult and complex positions of a person faced with a catastrophic event. H.F. struggles with conveying the enormity of the suffering he has encountered, suffering so great that he expresses a hope that the reader can grasp something of what it is like because getting a feel for the suffering is central to understanding the full extent of the catastrophe.

The inability of the narrator to find the words to approximate the suffering that surrounds him becomes a theme in *A Journal*. After reporting that "It was a lamentable thing to hear the miserable lamentations of poor dying creatures calling out for a minister to comfort them and pray with them," (90) H.F. reflects on the power of sounds and the inability of a written text to convey the full reality of the suffering. The narrator's concern about the limits of written accounts, of course, is a limit for every writer, but Defoe seems to be using this theme as yet more evidence of the narrator's sincerity and compassion as well as a call to the reader to be ready to regard every account of the suffering in London as something even more touching than the description could convey. From this point on the reader is to understand that all descriptions of suffering are to be accompanied by the groans and sobs which the narrator, whom the reader trusts, had told us are part of a full response to the account of the plague. The narrative stance developed by Defoe in passages such as these places a responsibility on the reader not only to take the account seriously, but also to become involved in the emotions and real-life applications of the lessons to be learned from the text.

H.F. presents another dimension of the complexity of doing good in his tracing how the plague progresses through London. He keeps a close watch on the Bills of Mortality, the weekly listing of deaths in all the parishes in London, an approach modern readers might recognize as a form of epidemiology. [7] Initially he watched the lists to gauge how close the plague would come to his area. What he notices over time is that poorer neighborhoods and densely populated neighborhoods, which he notes are often one and the same, have the highest rates of contagion and deaths. He then develops a theory about how people can survive the plague by moving away from poor, congested areas. In making these calculations based on his observations, H.F. exhibits something like a scientific habit of mind, an aspect that his readers will recognize as valuable in a crisis, especially as H.F. has been at pains to distance himself from all the quacks and seers whom he argues played on the fear of a frightened public when the plague arrived. In the moment, H.F.'s observations cannot benefit Londoners as there were few newspapers or other public media in 1665, but they are of great value to readers in 1722 looking for advice on surviving the plague.

Readers will also notice the contrast between the scientific attention H.F. pays to the Bills of Mortality and the strong religious beliefs he expresses early in the novel as he was deciding whether to stay in London or leave for the country as so many affluent Londoners were doing. He looks at a series of complications – the arrangements for someone to watch his brother's property, the lack of horses to get out of the city, the servant who was to travel with him deserted him – as particular providences indicating that he should throw himself on God's providence. He finally turns to bibliomancy to make his decision and the passage he turns to makes up his mind to stay. These religious convictions reflect Defoe's Puritan upbringing, and his steadfast religious principles inform his writings.[8] H.F. regularly reflects on the plague as a manifestation of God's punishment on a sinful London. He is harsh in recounting the deeds of those who turned to drinking, gambling, and abandonment of moral duty, and celebratory of those who remained faithful to their religious commitments. Puritans often saw adversity as a test for those living a pious life. H.F. regularly turns from a story of an admirable person to examine his own conscience, an inward-facing practice central to Puritan belief. H.F.'s religious faith shapes a good deal of his narrative choices and perhaps shapes the reader's view of him as a deeply religious person. Throughout the novel he uses his Puritan religious beliefs and values to frame episodes in his narrative and to justify opinions he offers on some of the events. That contrast adds to the complexity of the narrator as the novel develops. Austin Flanders captures this dual aspect of H.F.'s psychological make-up and places it in historical context:

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7 Norman S. Fiering treats this aspect of *A Journal* in "Epidemiology in Literature: The Case of Daniel Defoe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1985, pp. 455-472.

8 See J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (1966) for a sustained examination of Defoe's religious influences shaping his fiction. Maximillian E. Novak offers an extended treatment of Defoe's Puritanism in *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions,* Oxford University Press, (2001).

> The narrator's refusal to give up a providential view of the plague reflects the struggle of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to retain a humanistic view of the social community. Throughout the *Journal* he vacillates between understanding the plague as a purely naturalistic phenomenon and ascribing to it and its consequences a moral significance, although the opposition does not surface as a conscious intellectual dichotomy. [9]

Because plagues, almost by definition, leave few to tell their stories, the nature of the choices made in such a crisis are rarely known and so offer a rare opportunity for the reader. Modern readers will recognize the simultaneous presence of both strong religious beliefs and a scientific habit of mind as something that sometimes creates conflicts for them, but seem to coexist comfortably in H.F.

The narrator warrants the reader's attention and trust because he is a good, compassionate man and his responses to the suffering he encounters acts as both an indicator of the depth of his compassion and, once readers have some reassurance of that depth, a measure of how extensive is the suffering caused by the plague. The narrator reports often how a sad sight affected him and brought tears to his eyes. One lengthy account of a waterman whose family had been infected and were now quarantined suggests Defoe's emphasis on the narrator's empathy. After hearing the man's story, the narrator says "And with that word I saw the tears run plentifully down his face; and so they did down mine too, I assure you" (92). After another exchange with the waterman, the narrator exclaims:

> ". . . and with that I observ'd, he lifted up his Eyes to Heaven, with a Countenance that presently told me I had happened on a Man that was no Hypocrite, but a serious, religious, good Man, and his Ejaculation was an Expression of Thankfulness that, in such a Condition as he was in, he should be able to say his Family did not want." (92)

The observation by the narrator tells the reader how sensitive he is to not only the plight of others, but also to the virtues embodied in the waterman's actions. In addition, the qualities that H.F. identifies in the waterman are also true of him, at least insofar as recognizing the waterman's qualities suggests the capacity for those strengths in him. Later in that same passage H.F. tells the reader how the waterman's situation and demeanor stood as reprimand to his own presumption because the waterman had acted so courageously in the face of necessity, while he had a choice to flee the plague, a chance the waterman and his family never had due to their station in life. Toward the end of their conversation H.F. donates four shillings to the family, doubling what the waterman had been able to earn over the past week and then notes that he does not have words to capture the depth of the waterman's thankfulness, nor did the waterman have words enough, and they just stood there crying together.

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9 W. Austin Flanders, "Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* "and the Modern Urban Experience," The Centennial Review, vol. 16, no. 4 (Fall 1972), 347.

All these compassionate responses, however, act more as credential-building for an attractive and trusted narrator than they do of predictors of great things to come from the narrator. Throughout the novel H.F. makes some contributions toward helping those he meets and offers many words of advice. He develops a sound theory on how to survive the plague and he offers perspectives on the public policies put into place to alleviate suffering and reduce the risk from the plague, but he does not take actions of his own to relieve suffering. As mentioned earlier, the contrast between the need out in the streets and the shut windows creates an ambiguity about the reader's relationship with H.F. He is reliable, deeply sympathetic, and he succeeds in bringing the reader into the concerns the novel raises, but is not himself a model of straightforward philanthropic action. H.F. perhaps has his greatest impact in presenting the complex experience of being in a crisis and, in the midst of confusion and challenge, develops a good and admirable account of himself.

Defoe keeps his narrator distanced to ensure his reliability and to emphasize the objectivity as he reasons through the complex data the plague presents to develop his theory on how to survive. But that aloofness clashes with the narrator's engagement with the caring and compassion that characterizes H.F.'s responses to the people he meets and the suffering he witnesses as he moves out from the protection of his windows. Although H.F. models a philanthropic sensibility rather than actual philanthropic acts, he does present a number of examples of good and bad behaviors. He describes and condemns the people who rob and steal in the chaos of the advancing plague and the quacks and charlatans who sell quick cures and magical protections, but he also offers accounts of neighbors helping each other, civil servants going above and beyond the call of duty, and the steadfast support of government officials.

A Journal of the Plague Year, then, engages the reader in a detailed and convincing encounter with a city under siege from the bubonic plague. The fiction is fascinating because it deals with a compelling subject, but it also challenges the reader to carry out an examination of conscience about the responsibilities of any citizen in a time of crisis. The figure of the narrator becomes a focus of these concerns, both in his own actions (and their absence) as well as of the events he describes. Whatever its success in shaping the civic consciences of eighteenth-century Londoners, it retains its power to help contemporary readers to engage their own sense of where they stand in relation to their own plagues and community crises.

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