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An Examination of the Nature of Narrator in *A Journal of the Plague Year*

It was by no means a coincidence that *A Journal of the Plague Year* saw publication in the year following a bubonic epidemic in Marseilles, amid fears of another visitation in England, and juxtaposed, as it was, with Sir R. Walpole's unwelcome and unpopular Quarantine Act of 1722. It is far from certain though, whether or not these are evidence that DeFoe's primary motivation in writing *A Journal of the Plague Year* was a sense of civic responsibility and not artistic impulse, for perhaps they merely sparked the creative idea and, since public interest was already kindled, virtually guaranteed the book's success.

The historical context, and indeed the historical content of *A Journal of the Plague Year* actually clouds the issue in any debate as to whether or not the work is or is not a novel—for this is essentially the question we are asking. It is in the character of H.F. that we discover the answer, for the narrative itinerary attendant in this historical fiction points the way for the development of the novel, and it is in this context that we realise the intrinsic nature of *A Journal of the Plague Year* is also the nature of the novel. This being the case, it is appropriate then that we focus our attention on the artistic, aesthetic and functional features of its narrator.

Turning the first page of *A Journal of the Plague Year* presents us with the most obvious and often repeated characteristic of the narrator: his partiality for the list. Some of the topics expressed in this form:

(1) The bills of death.

(2) The numeration of the various trades with a note of their individual privations.

(3) The locations and histories of burial sites.

(4) The superstitious prescriptions (with a derisory introduction) employed by the masses to ward off the decease, ranging from incantations to potions.

H.F. even presents us with accurate copies of magic symbols used to the same effect; and we would not be greatly surprised to come upon graphs and charts and perhaps even odd equations. The lists and listings then are our first indication that our narrator makes a conscious effort to differentiate between the various sorts of information he gathers: endeavouring to present facts as facts, supposition as supposition, hearsay as hearsay.

But the symbolic value of these lists is even greater, for we can see from them that H.F. has certain inclinations towards that growing philosophy which has scientific enquiry as a ruling principle, and belief in its potential as a ruling virtue:

Doubtless, the physicians assisted many by their skill, and by their prudence and application, to the saving of their lives and restoring their health. (56)

If this is another example of the H.F.'s scient attitude, it is also the expression of a particular dichotomy which must consequently arise, for the plague is decidedly a heavenly vengeance, and in what way then could the hand of man effect the hand of God? This is a problem which concerns H.F.—on an unconscious level—throughout the visitation, and one which, like him, we shall leave until the end.

With his scientific enquiry comes, not surprisingly, a certain pragmatism, and it is interesting to observe the manner in which H.F. differentiates between doctors of repute

and “quaks”. (50) With only the evidence of the text at hand, the characteristics of a quack might include:

- (1) Foreign nationality.
- (2) A willingness to attract customers by public bills.
- (3) Promises to cure.

We might conclude from this list that H.F. is:

- (1) A Fascist.
- (2) A conservative (doctor’s, according to established tradition, do no advertise on street corners).
- (3) A realist.

We see in H.F., naturally enough, a methodical constitution: a desire to record accurately and orderly.

A terrible pit . . . forty feet in length, and about fifteen or sixteen feet broad, and at the time I first looked at it, about nine feet deep; but it was said they dug it near twenty feet deep afterwards . . .(77)

But also, when a second visit is made to the same pit, to watch the terrible and horrific tipping in of bodies, we confront what seems to be both an abnormal curiosity as well as a bizarre proclivity towards recklessness. It is tempting to offer functionality as the explanation, for the realism and details of *A Journal of the Plague Year* would have been scarce commodities in a history penned by a dull fellow who never dared leave his home. DeFoe, decidedly, had little choice but to include these characteristics, but they do have a more developmental purpose when we bare in mind that H.F. is, above all, a pious man.

. . . giving myself up to God everyday, and applying to Him with fasting, humiliation, and meditation. (94)

Forcing himself to witness the unwitnessable, H.F. is, as we see, performing a form of self flagellation. He suffers the terrors of God's work, is awed by it, and is thus forced into humility. And, of course, the humility is both the means *and* the end:

. . . a close conversing with death, or with diseases that threaten death, would scum off the gall from our tempers . . . (188)

H.F.'s systematic, observational, numerative and experimental bent, brought into conjunction with this piety, demonstrates a desire not so much to impose order on chaos, as has been suggested by some, but more to *secure* order *from* chaos. The apparent chaos—in reality the work of God—is indeed only apparent: if man cannot see the order, God certainly can. It is by the selective process that H.F. *secures* order from what *appears* to be chaos, just as it is the selective process which is employed in the writing of a history.

But for all H.F.'s piety, his own morality is sometimes brought into question:

I got myself discharged from the dangerous office I was in as soon as I could get another admitted, whom I obtained for a little money to accept of it. (182)

H.F. is himself oblivious to this obvious shirking of civic responsibility and banal bribery. A product of the upper middle class, he exercises his powers of privilege in a manner as natural and incognisant as an aristocrat; and in doing so, suggests morality's flexibility, changing subtly its form as it moves through the class stratum.

Intent on avoiding dangerous labour, as he is, we can hardly be surprised when we read the following:

But it was impossible to beat anything into the heads of the poor . . . Where they could get employment they pushed into any kind of business, the most dangerous and the most liable to infection . . . It is true, necessity was a very justifiable, warrantable plea, and nothing could be better; but their way of talk was much the same where the necessities were not the same.

From this passage we learn a number of things: Firstly, H.F., who had earlier and often praised the fact that bodies were always removed during the night, that there were two clinics available to treat the sick, etc., and who now seems amazed at the stupidity of the people who perform these public services, demonstrates his inclination towards self contradiction.

Secondly, though the tone is educated, by which I mean condescending, the grammar and the rambling of the thoughts expressed exposes something far from intellectual.

And lastly, with such a grudging admission that “necessity” was their only excuse, we must logically conclude that benevolent work would be sheer and inexcusable folly. This is not though the case:

. . . some pious ladies were so transported with zeal . . . that they went about in person distributing alms to the poor, and even visiting poor families . . . (221)

This is not another example of self contradiction, but rather an indication of disdain for the lower classes: for the work is equally essential, equally dangerous, only those performing the task are not equal. For all H.F.’s compassion, he is, after all, a product of his time.

H.F. though is not only critical of the poor: he chastises the government repeatedly for the programme of locking up infected houses, and even offers a subtle censure to the court for being away and seeming to care little for the welfare of the citizens. And so we see a character who in many respects displays a sense of superiority, able to observe, but also to make judgements upon the things observed.

It is fitting then that with this superciliousness comes a certain ruthlessness:

They committed a great many petty thieveries in the houses where they were employed; and some of them were publicly whipped for it, when perhaps they ought rather to have been hanged for examples . . .(101)

It is indeed difficult to reconcile this with the Christian ethic of forgiveness, though as we observe the wrath of God expressed in the plague, we seem to have entered a period when the virtues of the old testament supersede the new.

In terms of aesthetics, it is not surprising that the reader forms no close attachment to H.F.: if we are given few reason to incubate dislike, we are equally given few to like, and so we are left in a rather neutral mode, with no strong passions, and therefore no strong opinions. It is more the story than the story teller which impresses us.

Finally, we turn our attention to H.F.'s religious position as regards to the nature of the plague. There can be no doubt that the visitation was seen by H.F. as not only an indication of heavenly displeasure, but also the direct work of God. Indeed, his relationship with God, during the early days, is perceived as being so close, that he takes a number of innocuous incidents as being signs commanding him personally to remain in London, and to place his safety in heavenly providence.

As H.F. wanders about town, observing, questioning, resolving by "experiments", (214) demonstrating, in other words, the faculty of scientific enquiry, his attitude suffers an important change. There is still no question that the plague is the work of God, though it is severely qualified. In this respect the development of H.F. and DeFoe's quest for realism come together, for it might be suggested that such a subtle change of view, born of lessons learned, have a closer correlation with reality than the broad metamorphosis we often seek and find in contemporary novels. Our preoccupation with character seems to have driven us beyond the natural bounds of what is *really* human. When we find then, as we do, H.F. finally insisting that God takes no part in choosing who will live and who will die, we see also, in this respect at least, a slightly less personal relationship than the one expressed before. We see also, and more importantly, a change from fatalism or absolute trust in God, to individual responsibility. H.F.'s development is not great, though it is true to life.

. . . the best physic against the plague is to run away from it . . . (209)

Works Cited

DeFoe Daniel *A Journal of the Plague Year*
Wrights Lane, London. Penguin Books. 1986.