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Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*

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A Journal of the Plague Year purports to be the memoir of a bourgeois merchant, H.F., who stayed in London during the Great Plague of 1665. It has been observed of Defoe that in his fictions he tends 'to concentrate on characters who find themselves *in extremis*' (Birdsall 1985:101). In the *Journal* this is true not only of H.F., the narrator, but of London as a whole. Pat Rogers describes the work as a 'masterly study of a community *in extremis*' (Rogers 1985:166). The *Journal* presents responses to a great natural disaster. These are the responses of the City authorities, as they try to cope with the Plague, the varying responses of the London population, divided into their social classes, and the responses of H.F. himself, as he wanders about the City, observing how the extraordinary has suddenly become routine. In addition, H.F's exposition and commentary in the *Journal* are themselves an attempt to come to terms with the Plague, both as a natural phenomenon, and as having social, moral, and religious implications.

The context of Defoe's writing the *Journal* was the outbreak of plague in and around Marseilles in 1720. In newspaper articles, and in a pamphlet, *Due Preparations for the Plague* (1722), Defoe offered support for government policy, and suggested practical measures for the government and people to take, should the plague cross the Channel.[1] *A Journal of the*

1 Daniel Defoe. 1969. *A Journal of the Plague Year*, edited with an introduction by Louis Landa ('Oxford English Novels'. Oxford University Press: London, New York, Toronto, pp.xiii-xv. Hereafter referred to as 'OEN'.

Plague Year, published in 1722, fits, to some extent, into this propaganda context. It can be seen as a warning, based upon a forged first-hand testimony, of the dislocation the plague might bring, if Defoe's recommendations are not put into effect.

But as a work of imagination, the *Journal* cannot be reduced to Defoe's propaganda intentions. In this respect, it contrasts with the pamphlet, *Due Preparations*. In the pamphlet there is also fiction, but it is of the didactic moral fable sort, in which speech and action are designed merely to illustrate preconceived lessons. The *Journal*, by contrast, is a serious attempt to forge somebody's memoir, an autobiographical account of the experience of living in a plague-ridden city. For the *Journal* to be plausible, Defoe must present the grim circumstances of a city in the throes of dislocation. This is necessary even from the standpoint of propaganda. If the problems of life during the Plague are not strongly enough drawn, Defoe's practical recommendations will have no force. We are to be driven to accept the recommendations by the horror of the facts presented. But while the facts sometimes support the lessons we are to learn, they also tend at times to subvert Defoe's intentions. The reality he depicts is too problematical to be dealt with by the approaches he recommends.

But the *Journal* subverts more than just Defoe's propaganda aims. To be convincing, it must show H.F's fear, guilt, and irrationality, as he tries to adapt to a terrifying situation with the resources of only a fairly average moral character. Moreover, H.F's memoir cannot have the detachment and objectivity of an uninvolved commentary, since H.F. has lived through the Plague. Defoe must present the anxiety and confusion with which H.F., as narrator, worries at the problems of dealing with the Plague. And so, the more verisimilitude Defoe gives to the *Journal*, the more it exposes tensions, oppositions, and contradictions in the texture of H.F's 'lived experience', both as the citizen of 1665, and as the subsequent memorialist. In this way, H.F's whole mentality as a seventeenth-century bourgeois citizen, and the ideologies that he espouses are brought into question. Thus a recognition of the *Journal*'s imaginative power entails a recognition of its radical self-subversion.

In this paper I shall examine this self-subversion in the context of responses to the Plague by both the City authorities and H.F. I shall consider responses to the Plague, itself, which involve science, practical policy, and religion, and also responses of human beings to each other under the stress of living through the Plague.

Science, Policy, and Religion

Firstly, the Plague challenges the Baconian faith in the power of science to comprehend and control natural processes for the sake of improving the conditions of human life. In the event, science is completely defeated. Medicine is incapable of curing the plague. In the *Journal* H.F's only references to medical treatment are to lament its horror and futility. With bubonic plague the doctors try to break the swellings by caustics, or scarifying. H.F's verdict is that 'the Physicians and Surgeons may be said to have tortured many poor Creatures, even to Death.'[2] With other forms of plague, where symptoms do not appear, the physicians are baffled: '[they] knew not how to discover the Sick from the Sound' (*Journal,* 202). H.F. is compelled to admit that 'the Plague defied all Medicine' (*Journal,* 35).

H.F. discusses the two principal hypotheses concerning the transmission of the plague (*Journal,* 74-75, 192-194. *OEN*:xxv-xxvi). He rejects that of a miasma, according to which a plague-bearing cloud is supposed to hang over the affected area. H.F. prefers the hypothesis of contagion, according to which the plague is passed from person to person by way of infection. But at this time there is no scientific way of deciding between these hypotheses, because the nature of the plague is itself unknown. The hypotheses can never get beyond the level of speculation. Reasons for and against may be accumulated on both sides, so that the discussion, like H.F's, has a semblance of rationality. But ingenuity of hypothesis is not matched by any power of experimental decision. H.F's *Journal* reveals how science failed to cope with the Plague in theory as well as practice.

Because of this, in the *Journal*, Nature begins to take on the character assigned to it in pre-scientific thought. We are accustomed to think of Nature as intelligible, regular, and law-like. But the Plague, as presented in the *Journal*, in its incomprehensibility, its relentlessness, its striking at random, seems to deserve much more the character of the ancient Greek concept 'anangke'. 'Anangke' is both chance and necessity, an irreducible and intransigent power in the material universe that opposes Mind. As blind necessity, it interferes with human purposes; being unintelligible, it appears as pure contingency. It is mysterious, hostile, and unavoidable (Cornford 1937:162-177).

It is in this context that H.F's attempts to understand the Plague must be assessed. As an amateur philosopher, H.F. wishes to record facts accurately and thoroughly, and find the correct explanation for them. His rationalism

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2 Daniel Defoe, 1990. *A Journal of the Plague Year*, edited by Louis Landa with a new introduction by David Roberts ('The World's Classics', Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, pp.81-82. Hereafter referred to as *Journal.*

has been described as 'sceptical' and 'modest', and these were favourite terms of the natural philosophers, themselves. Such 'scepticism' denotes not just suspension of judgment, but carefulness of observation, and a willingness to estimate degrees of probability. H.F. certainly tries to be a philosopher of this kind, but his attempts at scientific explanation are inevitably undermined by the incomprehensibility of the Plague. As a result, his dedication to scepticism proves to be erratic.

For example, H.F. doubts the statistics of plague-deaths, published in the Bills of Mortality. It is not likely that records will be accurate in a time of such dislocation (*Journal,* 99). Moreover, it is probable some parish officers will be bribed by households to keep their plague-deaths out of the official record, so that they can avoid having their houses quarantined (*Journal,* 203-206). H.F's inference here is not unreasonable. However, he uses this inference incautiously to explain the apparent decline in plague-deaths during the early months of 1665. H.F. will not accept the figures, because they threaten his faith in the axiom that 'nature makes no leaps.' Despite the evidence, he insists that plague-deaths must have been high, but that the officials corruptly falsified the records (in reality, the cold weather must have altered the breeding habits of infected fleas) (*Journal,* 203-207; OEN, 289). It is impossible for H.F. to suspend judgment, to rest content with ignorance in circumstances so destructive and so terrifying. The desire for hypothesis exceeds the sceptical reluctance to move beyond the evidence. The facility with which H.F. constructs hypotheses is a testimony to a desire to maintain the scientific faith in the intelligibility of the universe.

In a similar way, he rejects the miasmatic theory of plague-transmission, because it encourages fatalism and discourages people from trying to combat the Plague (*Journal,* 192-193). The desire to take action cannot be abandoned, even though, as H.F. has finally to admit, all action proved to be useless.

The City authorities' main method of dealing with the Plague is to quarantine houses. Wherever plague is found, the house is to be shut up, with its inhabitants inside, and guarded by a watchman (*Journal,* 38-44).

At first, H.F. seems ambivalent towards this policy: 'this Part of the History of the Plague is very melancholy; *but the most grievous Story must be told*' (*Journal,* 36) But subsequently, his tone changes, and he offers a glib justification: 'It is true, that the locking up the Doors of People's Houses, and setting a Watchman there Night and Day, to prevent their stirring out . . . looked very hard and cruel . . . But it was a public Good that justified the private Mischief (*Journal,* 47-48)'. The policy now only 'looks' very hard and cruel, and the easy assurance of the justification is indicated by the neat antithesis of 'public good' and 'private mischief'.

It is surprising, therefore, to discover that H.F's settled opinion is that this policy was completely useless, and worse than useless, harmful. H.F. testifies that people in shut-up houses commonly escaped by stratagem, deceit, or violence, and the infected 'spread the Infection farther by their wandring about with the Distemper upon them'. (*Journal,* 50-53). The real reason for this policy's being useless is that the plague was spread by rats and fleas. Although Defoe did not know this, he was aware of another reason why the policy would not work: the pneumonic variety of plague is spread by infected breath from one person to another, and the victims display no symptoms. Plague can, therefore, be caught from people who are apparently well: '. . . this is the Reason why it is impossible in a Visitation to prevent the spreading of the Plague by the utmost human Vigilance (*viz.*), that it is impossible to know the infected People from the sound; or that the infected People should perfectly know themselves . . . shutting up the WELL, or removing the SICK will not do it . . . (*Journal,* 191-192)'. The Plague is an undetectable enemy, whose movements cannot be plotted. It is this recognition that eventually compels H.F. to the desperate admission: *'the best Physick against the Plague is to run away from it'* (*Journal,* 197-198).

It becomes apparent from H.F's *Journal* that all the City authorities could do successfully was to maintain law and order, and markets for the supply of provisions to the City. All the measures taken to combat the Plague, itself, were a complete failure.[3] Although H.F. realises the futility of taking action against the Plague, he nonetheless recommends certain measures. To wealthy people like himself he suggests voluntarily shutting up one's family, either in a house, or on a ship on the river.[4] This could not be effective against rats and fleas. But, even on Defoe's own premises, the measure is useless, because it is possible to be infected by people who are apparently well. H.F. also recommends an increase in the number of pest-houses, to which the sick may be removed, and isolated. Apart from problems of isolation, this measure is faced with the difficulty of cost. As H.F. points out, pest-houses charged fees, while the social class most affected by the Plague was the poor (*Journal,* 74; 181-182).

The problem of the poor is the most intransigent with which H.F. is faced, and here his proffered solutions become most utopian. He suggests a mass evacuation of the poor from London. Since the population of London was

3 *Journal,* pp.180-185. At the height of the Plague the system of collecting dead bodies by carts breaks down, and the bodies remain unburied in the streets: see *Journal*, pp.102, 178, 179-180 (compare 186).

4 *Journal*, pp.55, 75, 77-78, 111. Cf. Daniel Defoe, *Due Preparations for the Plague As Well for Soul as Body* in *The Works of Daniel Defoe in Sixteen Volumes*, ed. G.H. Maynadier (The Kelmscott Society Publishers, New York: 1903-4), Vol. XV, pp.[44]-[86], [179]-[202]. Hereafter referred to as *Due Preparations*.

about five hundred thousand, such an evacuation must involve at least two hundred and fifty thousand people. An evacuation of this scale, given the inefficiencies of the seventeenth-century administrative machine, and the meagreness of poor relief, is fantasy. That this proposal is a well-meaning bluff is indicated by the manner in which H.F. puts it forward: 'I could propose many Schemes', he says (that is, for the evacuation). In fact, he does not propose even one.[5] He offers no figures for costs, nor does he discuss methods of transporting, feeding, or lodging the poor, nor who is to pay for all this. The financial and administrative burden of a mass evacuation would make any such scheme impossible.

As if in tacit recognition of this, H.F. suggests a measure for the poor to adopt privately. He tells the story of three poor men of Wapping, who leave London to save themselves by bivouacking in the countryside. They join up with another group of poor refugees, find support from the local people, build themselves a shed to live in, and eventually move to a decayed cottage, which they renovate (*Journal,* 120-150).

This is a moral fable designed to teach self-help, cooperation, and mutual charity. H.F. offers it as 'a Pattern for all poor Men to follow' (*Journal,* 122). But a comparison of the fable with what H.F. tells us elsewhere about the condition of the poor demonstrates that the story of the three men cannot serve as a pattern. Defoe stacks the odds in favour of his protagonists: they have a little money, and a tent, and are loaned a horse. They obtain a fake certificate as to their origin. The religious behaviour of their group charms the country-people into providing for them, despite what H.F. tells us about the fear and severity of the rural communities towards the poor who flee from London. The local gentry act as *dei ex machina* to support them with charity and advice. They even receive from a Justice of the Peace a medical certificate guaranteeing their health, even though H.F. is aware the infected may show no symptoms (*Journal,* 126-127, 129-130, 144 [compare 153-155], 147-148).

The story of the three poor men is another bluff, well-meaning, but desperate. Given what H.F. tells us about the poor over the whole course of the *Journal*, his optimism here can only be considered suspect. H.F. is affirming what he wants to believe, rather than what he knows to be true.

In these circumstances, it is natural that there should be a turn to religion. But we find that the confusion and uncertainty of H.F's philosophy are reflected in his religious thought.

In two passages H.F. seems to contradict himself:

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5 *Journal*, pp.198-199. A modified but still implausible scheme is advanced in *Due Preparations*, pp.[16]-[23]. It assumes the post-1688 system of National Debt.

> . . . I cannot but with some Wonder, find some People, now the Contagion is over, talk of its being an immediate Stroke from Heaven, without the Agency of Means . . . which I look upon with Contempt . . . (*Journal,* 75).
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> In the Middle of their Distress . . . just then it pleased God, as it were, by his immediate Hand to disarm this Enemy . . .
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> Nor was this by any new Medicine found out . . . but it was evidently from the secret invisible Hand of him, that had at first sent this Disease as a Judgment upon us . . . the Disease was enervated, and its Malignity spent . . . let the Philosophers search for Reasons in Nature to account for it by . . . those Physicians, who had the least Share of Religion in them, were oblig'd to acknowledge that it was all supernatural, that it was extraordinary, and that no Account could be given of it (*Journal,* 246-247).

These two passages seem to contradict each other over the issue of whether God sent the Plague directly, or through the agency of natural causes. The first passage implies clearly that God did work through natural causes. The second passage might be read as implying the opposite: that would seem to be a natural reading of 'it was all supernatural', 'no Account could be given of it'. On the other hand, in the second passage there are signs of a naturalistic view lurking to upset the supernaturalist affirmation: 'the Disease was enervated, and its Malignity spent'. This language suggests natural processes. But if we read the passage as a pious wish to praise God without denying that he works through natural causes, then the language of the climax 'it was all supernatural', 'no Account could be given of it' is excessive to the point of self-contradiction. Our conclusion must be that there is no single point of view expressed in this passage. It is a confused movement between the two opposite points of view.

The opposition between human power and divine power is clear, but H.F. cannot remain within this opposition. Discussing the cessation of the Plague, he writes: 'Nothing but the immediate Finger of God, nothing but omnipotent Power could have done it; the Contagion despised all Medicine . . .' (*Journal,* 244-245). This is definite. But a few lines later, he writes: '. . . in that very Moment it pleased God, with a most agreeable Surprize, to cause the Fury of it to abate, even of it self, and the Malignity declining . . . tho' infinite Numbers were sick, yet fewer died . . .' (*Journal,* 245).

As soon as God's power becomes the term of explanation, H.F. cannot resist introducing references to natural processes: God caused the fury of the Plague to abate, *even of itself.* The two elements of this idea cancel each other out. What can it mean to say that the Plague abated of itself, if this is also due to God's power?

H.F. is most definite when he is asserting that God works through natural causes. It is when H.F. moves apparently to a position of supernaturalism that he insists on introducing into his utterances the ambiguity of naturalistic qualifications. H.F. is at his most shifty, when he is at his most zealous.

Typically, this shiftiness appears when H.F. is discussing 'particular Providences', and miracles. A particular Providence is God's guidance of the life of an individual:'. . . there were many wonderful Deliverances of Persons from Infection, and Deliverances of Persons when Infected, which intimate singular and remarkable Providence, in the particular Instances to which they refer, and I esteem my own Deliverance to be one next to miraculous . . .' (*Journal,* 193).

What does 'next to miraculous' mean? Does it mean H.F's deliverance was a miracle, or not? H.F's evasiveness here is explained by the following paragraph:

> But when I am speaking of the Plague, as a Distemper arising from natural Causes, we must consider it as it was really propagated by natural Means . . . for as the divine Power has form'd the whole Scheme of Nature, and maintains Nature in its Course; so the same Power thinks fit to let his own Actings with Men, whether of Mercy or Judgment, go on in the ordinary Course of natural Causes, and he is pleased to act by those natural Causes as the ordinary Means; excepting and reserving to himself nevertheless a Power to act in a supernatural Way when he sees occasion: Now 'tis evident, that in the Case of an Infection, there is no apparent extraordinary occasion for supernatural Operation, but the ordinary Course of Things appears sufficiently arm'd, and made capable of all the Effects that Heaven usually directs by a Contagion. Among these Causes and Effects this of the secret Conveyance of Infection imperceptible, and unavoidable, is more than sufficient to execute the Fierceness of divine Vengeance . . . (*Journal,* 193-194).

The logical relationship between the two paragraphs is difficult to determine. On one interpretation, the first asserts that there were particular miraculous deliverances, while the second asserts that nonetheless in general God operates through the course of Nature. But this interpretation is controverted by the claim in the second paragraph that in a plague miracles are unnecessary: God's providence cannot be avoided because transmission of the infection is imperceptible. On another interpretation, the paragraphs are not opposed, but take up the same standpoint: people are delivered from the Plague by God, but this is carried out through the course of natural events, which remains hidden. But if this is the correct interpretation, what can it mean to say these deliverances were 'wonderful' or 'next to miraculous'? The thought in the two paragraphs is clearly confused.

The theological problem here is how particular Providences are possible without the occurrence of miracles. If particular Providences are brought about through the course of Nature, then the sequence of natural events must be pre-ordained. If the chance infection of one individual, and the chance survival of another is not really chance, then what appears to us as chance must be predestination. H.F's problem is that while he is reluctant to believe in miracles, he is reluctant to believe in predestination as well.

H.F. must retain belief in particular Providences. This is partly for his own mental comfort, since he is staying in London during the Plague, and wishes

to justify doing so. It is also partly to appease his moral outrage at the sins of the irreligious, who disregard God's law, while the Plague is raging (*Journal,* 66-68). But, H.F. also wishes to reject predestination ('a *Turkish* Predestinarianism'), because it produces fatalism and passivity (*Journal,* 192-193). These are intolerable to H.F., who wishes to preserve the illusion of the possibility of practical action. And, while admitting the possibility of miracles in principle, H.F. is reluctant to believe in their actual occurrence during the Plague. To satisfy these requirements together is logically impossible.

While H.F. rejects predestination without qualification, he is, as we have seen, shifty about particular Providences and miracles. In the conflict between supernaturalism and naturalism in his thinking, it is supernaturalism that has to suffer, and become subjected to ambiguities and vagueness. What this complex of dispositions suggests is that H.F's deepest impulse is to maintain belief in the intelligibility of Nature, and the capacity of human beings to control its effects by action: in other words, to maintain faith in the Baconian philosophy. If practical activity is to be possible, predestination must be ruled out. Since it is not an essential Christian doctrine, this can be done without qualification (it can even be displaced on to the Turks). But, the issue of the intelligibility of Nature is more problematical. It is essential to exclude miracles from the course of Nature, so that natural science can be possible. Science must assume that any event it studies is a natural event. But, in the seventeenth century miracles and supernaturalism cannot be rejected. They must, therefore, be affirmed, but affirmed with qualifications and evasions, that make the precise meaning of the affirmations indeterminable.

H.F's supernaturalism is not a sham. The impulses to believe in the supernatural are real and strong. One is the individual's need for the feeling of divine protection in conditions of unmitigated terror. Another is the ideological requirement, itself, to believe in the intelligibility of Nature. In the immaturity of science the Plague remains incomprehensible. To resist this appearance of the irrational, it becomes necessary to re-emphasise that Nature *is* intelligible. The supernatural becomes the support of the natural. To believe that God works through natural causes is to affirm not only something about God, but also that there *is* a pattern of natural causes. But, finally, the relation of God and Nature in H.F's *Journal* is that of a contradictory unity. On the one hand, each is present to support the other: Nature provides the domain for God's activity, while God provides the principle of order to guarantee the intelligibility of Nature. On the other hand, neither can avoid the struggle to overcome the other: Nature's

intelligibility tends to displace God, while God's overruling power tends to destroy Nature's autonomy.

The *Journal* belongs to an historic conjuncture, the passing of Western Europe from the Middle Ages to Modernity. The Great Plague of 1665 was the last large-scale outbreak of the disease in England. It was a medieval phenomenon, the last fling of uncontrollable Nature against modern civilisation. But, in the 1660s modern civilisation had not yet developed its powers. The Baconian philosophy of mastering Nature by understanding it was more an ideal than a reality. When the Plague strikes, natural philosophy is tested, and fails. For a brief period, the Middle Ages and the modern world interpenetrate each other. It is this interpenetration that accounts for the tensions, the ambiguities, and the obfuscations in the treatment of science and religion in H.F's *Journal*.

Social Responses: Class Consciousness and Human Consciousness

In considering social responses in the *Journal*, it is necessary to distinguish between class consciousness, and 'human consciousness'. Commonly, H.F. responds to the Plague and to other people from a class standpoint. The Plague increases class inequality in London, and H.F. is concerned for social stability. But he can, sometimes, suspend class considerations, and view events as a London inhabitant, or just as a human being aware of the suffering of other human beings.

But, to take class considerations first. The power of H.F's own class identity over his behaviour emerges in the long drawn-out process of his decision to stay in London. When, in mid-1665, the nobility and gentry throng out of the City, H.F. has to decide whether to go, or stay. He is clear about the conflict of values:

> I had two important things before me; the one was the carrying on my Business and Shop; which was considerable, and in which was embark'd all my Effects in the World: and the other was the Preservation of my Life in so dismal a Calamity . . . (*Journal*, 8).

The threat to his business is a threat to his livelihood:

> [I] had a House, Shop, and Ware-houses fill'd with Goods; and in short, to leave them . . . had been to hazard the Loss not only of my Trade, but of my Goods, and indeed of all I had in the World' (*Journal*, 8-9).

H.F. is reluctant to leave London because of the threat to his business. His brother, who intends to leave, tries to overcome H.F's reluctance by

suggesting that God can look after H.F's goods, if H.F. leaves, as easily as he can look after H.F's life, if H.F. stays. H.F. decides to leave, but his resolution is weak. Accidents delay his departure, and he interprets these as divine directions for him to stay. His brother points out that lack of a horse, or loss of a servant does not stop him leaving, and so cannot be regarded as divine power overruling H.F's determination. H.F. changes his mind, and decides to leave. But, still irresolute, he resorts to Bibliomancy. Opening the Bible at random at Psalm XCI, he interprets its words as a divine permission to stay: *'Thou shalt not be afraid . . . for the pestilence that walketh in darkness: nor for the destruction that wasteth at noon-day. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand: but it shall not come nigh thee'*. After further accidents, which compel him to remain, he becomes firm in his resolution to stay (*Journal,* 9-14).

Flanders points out that for H.F. 'the economic motive is the operative one' (Flanders 1976:165). Indeed, the economic motive is the only one that makes H.F. at all reluctant to leave London, and involves him in this agonising deliberation. But, H.F. is incapable of taking a decision on this basis. He cannot say, 'I will stay in London, for the sake of my business, at the risk of my life'. This kind of clarity is impossible for H.F. He must have a religious justification. However, his brother's arguments are stronger theologically than his own. That H.F. recognises this is shown by the fact that he twice decides to follow his brother's advice. His irresolution is a sign that he wants to stay in London, and the only reason for this is economic. In this life and death situation, where an existential decision is necessary, H.F. decides in favour of his business. He subordinates the risk to his life to the risk to his property.

That H.F. remains uneasy about staying in London becomes clear from his several times expressing repentance for the decision. But even the nature of the repentance remains vague. Sometimes, it seems to be only regret for his rashness without any sense of sinfulness (*Journal,* 76, 177). Once, when he compares his situation with that of a poor waterman, who has to stay to look after his family, H.F. thinks his own staying was presumption before God (*Journal,* 108-109). But of this more religious repentance we hear no more. H.F's final attitude is a typically shifty belief that he was the object of a particular Providence: '. . . tho' Providence seem'd to direct my Conduct to be otherwise . . .' The shiftiness is apparent in 'seem'd'. Ironically, the main clause of this sentence is the place where H.F. directs everyone else to flee: '. . . yet, it is my opinion, and I must leave it as a Prescription *(viz.) that the best Physick against the Plague is to run away from it'* (*Journal,* 197-198).

Although H.F. generally wishes to appear rational, humane, and non-partisan, he allows his class attitudes to show on occasion. As with his views

on dealing with the Plague, we find here also a movement in his discourse, in which a conventional view is displaced by another, more authentic, and more deeply felt. The Plague acts like a cathartic drug on H.F., forcing him to articulate what he most deeply thinks and feels.

H.F. notes that the nobility and gentry left London in May and June: '. . . the Nobility and Gentry, from the West part of the City throng'd out of Town, with their Families and Servants in an unusual Manner . . . nothing was to be seen but Waggons and Carts, with Goods, Women, Servants, Children, etc. Coaches fill'd with People of the better Sort, and Horsemen attending them, and all hurrying away . . . .This was a very terrible and melancholy Thing to see . . .' (*Journal,* 7).

There is neither reproach nor apology here, only the conventional expression of sorrow. H.F. maintains a decorous respect by referring to those fleeing as 'People of the better Sort'. But his account also speaks through the vividness of the images. H.F. dwells on the wealth of material and human resources of the nobility and gentry. Not only have they somewhere to go, they have the transportation, and the command over other people's labour that enables them to remove both themselves and their property.

In the above passage H.F. maintains a discrete silence about the aristocratic social order. What he really feels emerges later when he mentions the removal of the Stuart court: '. . . the Court removed early *(viz.)* in the Month of *June,* and went to *Oxford*, where it pleas'd God to preserve them; and the Distemper did not, *as I heard of*, so much as touch them; for which I cannot say, that I ever saw they shew'd any great Token of Thankfulness, and hardly any thing of Reformation, tho' they did not want being told that their crying Vices might, without Breach of Charity, be said to have gone far, in bringing that terrible Judgment upon the whole Nation' (*Journal,* 15-16).

The cathartic effect on H.F's feelings is apparent here. He begins with a conventional expression of thankfulness for the preservation of the Court. But the recognition that the Court remained untouched by the Plague moves him to indignation. The Plague began in the West End of London, the area inhabited by the nobility and gentry, and oriented towards the Court at Whitehall. This ought to be a sign that God aimed the Plague at them for their aristocratic vices, but when the Court removes to Oxford, God leaves them unpunished! The bourgeoisie and the poor must remain in London to endure the Plague. It is this incomprehensible outrage that moves H.F. to his denunciation. The Court is responsible for the nation's sufferings.

After this moment of truth H.F. is unable to return to conventional deference. His final verdict on the Court minimises and dismisses its

contribution to managing the Plague: '. . . really the Court concern'd themselves so little, and that little they did was of so small Import, that I do not see it of much Moment to mention any Part of it here . . . ' (*Journal,* 234).

Since the nobility and gentry leave London before the Plague develops, they do not figure largely in the pages of H.F's *Journal.* The social class with which H.F. is most concerned is the poor. As the trade of London comes to a full stop for six months, the ranks of the poor are swelled by artisans, and wage workers of all sorts, as well as discharged servants (*Journal,* 28; 94-96).

H.F's attitude to this mass of poverty is ambivalent. He is aware that the Plague attacks the poorest suburbs most, and that the poor, without regular work, cannot afford food or medicine. He realises that some of the poor are forced into employment as watchmen, or nurses, or buriers, and that this increases their chance of being infected. He realises that whereas the wealthy may lay in provisions to quarantine themselves, the poor must go to market every day, and so run a greater risk of infection. He knows that some of the poor flee in desperation to the countryside, and there die from starvation. (*Journal,* 85, 89-90, 97, 102, 78, 150-151). All this elicits H.F's compassion: '. . . all Trades being stopt, Employment ceased; the Labour, and by that, the Bread of the Poor were cut off; and at first indeed, the Cries of the poor were most lamentable to hear . . . Many indeed fled into the Countries . . . Death overtook them on the Road . . .' (*Journal,* 95-96).

But this is only one side of H.F's response: he also routinely censures the poor for their folly and wickedness. While believing in Bibliomancy, himself, he nonetheless condemns the characteristic superstitions of the common people, such as astrology, second sight, and celestial prodigies. (*Journal,* 19-28). H.F. knows the poor are forced to run greater risks of infection than the wealthy, but he is still surprised at their 'recklessness', and full of blame: '. . . tho' the Plague was chiefly among the Poor; yet, were the Poor the most Venturous and Fearless of it, and went about their Employment, with a Sort of brutal Courage; I must call it so, for it was founded neither on Religion or Prudence; scarce did they use any Caution, but run into any Business, which they could get Employment in, tho' it was the most hazardous . . . (*Journal,* 89-90)'.

This angry denunciation is due to fear of lower-class revolt. H.F's mass evacuation scheme is motivated not only by compassion, but by the desire to ease the City authorities of 'the dangerous People that belong to them . . . those who in Case of a Siege, are call'd the useless Mouths' (*Journal,* 198). H.F. worries at the problem why the people were not driven to revolt by the Plague. His reflections on this issue are full of evasion and contradiction:

> . . . nor were [the City magistrates] without Apprehensions . . . that Desperation should push the People upon Tumults, and cause them to rifle the Houses of rich Men, and plunder the Markets of Provisions . . .
>
> But the Prudence of my Lord Mayor, and [the other magistrates] was such, and they were supported with Money from all Parts so well, that the poor People were kept quiet . . .
>
> Two Things, besides this, contributed to prevent the Mob doing any Mischief: One was, that really the Rich themselves had not laid up Stores of Provisions in their Houses . . . so the Mob had no Notion of finding Stores of Provisions there . . .
>
> . . . the Vigilance of the Lord Mayor, and such Magistrates as could be had . . . prevented [tumults]; and they did it by the most kind and gentle Methods they could think of, as particularly by relieving the most desperate with Money, and putting others into Business, and particularly that Employment of watching Houses that were infected and shut up . . .
>
> The Women, and Servants, that were turned off from their Places, were likewise employed as Nurses to tend the Sick in all Places . . . (*Journal,* 96-97).

H.F. provides too many reasons. If charity was so great as to keep the poor quiet, why was there still a threat to the houses of the rich, which was only forestalled because the rich were too imprudent to lay in provisions? If charity was sufficient, why were the poor forced into the dangerous employment of being watchmen, and nurses?

Eventually, H.F. is forced to admit the grim truth. It was the Plague, itself, which prevented popular revolt:

> . . . the Plague which raged in a dreadful Manner [in summer and autumn] carried off . . . thirty or forty Thousand of these very People, which had they been left, would certainly have been an unsufferable Burden, by their Poverty . . . and they would in Time have been even driven to the Necessity of plundering either the City it self, or the Country adjacent . . . (*Journal,* 98).
>
> . . . tho' [the magistrates] did much, the Dead Carts did more . . . (*Journal,* 129).

H.F's mixed feelings of compassion and fear explain why he worries so much about poor relief. At his most assured he asserts the magnitude and sufficiency of public and private charity without qualification:

> . . . had not publick Charity provided for [discharged servants], they would have been in the worst Condition of any People in the City (*Journal,* 28).
>
> . . . it is a Debt of Justice due to the Temper of the People of that Day to take Notice here, that not only great Sums, *very great* Sums of Money were charitably sent to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen for the Assistance and Support of the poor distemper'd People; but abundance of private People daily distributed large Sums of Money for their Relief . . . (*Journal,* 210).

But elsewhere, H.F. qualifies his assertions:

> Many of [the poor] died calling for help, and even for Sustenance out at their Windows . . . but it must be added that when ever [such] Cases . . . were represented to my Lord-Mayor, they always were reliev'd (*Journal,* 85).

Here, the relief of the poor seems to depend on their misery being reported to the authorities.

As we have seen, H.F's final explanation why there was no lower-class revolt is that the Plague demoralised, and destroyed so many of the poor. He asserts that at the height of the Plague thirty or forty thousand of the poor died, and comments: 'had they been left, [they] would certainly have been an unsufferable Burden, by their Poverty, *that is to say*, the whole City could not have supported the Expence of them . . .' (*Journal,* 98). But, if the City could not provide for forty thousand, how could it provide for several hundred thousand?

H.F. admits that the records of poor relief did not survive: 'There were, no Question, Accounts kept of their Charity, and of the just Distribution of it by the Magistrates: But as such Multitudes of those very Officers died, thro' whose Hands it was distributed; and also that . . . most of the Accounts of those Things were lost in the great Fire . . . so I could never come at the particular Account . . .' (*Journal,* 93).

Despite this admission of ignorance, H.F. accepts hearsay as to the size of the sums involved: '. . . tho' I could never, nor I believe any one else come to a full Knowledge of what was so contributed, yet I do believe, that as I heard one say, that was a critical Observer of that Part, there was not only many Thousand Pounds contributed, but many hundred thousand Pounds, to the Relief of the Poor . . . one man affirm'd to me that he could reckon up above one hundred thousand Pounds a Week, which was distributed . . .' (*Journal,* 211).

These grandiose assertions turn out to be a defence against attacks on the City for lack of charity. H.F. confesses that the City authorities were more reluctant to use public funds for the support of the poor during the Plague than for the rebuilding of the City after the Great Fire. This has evidently led to criticism of the City: 'But possibly the Managers of the City's Credit, at that Time, made more Conscience of breaking in upon the Orphan's Money to shew Charity to the distress'd Citizens than the Managers in the following Years did, to beautify the City, and re-edify the Buildings, tho' in the first Case . . . the Publick Faith of the City [would] have been less subjected to Scandal and Reproach' (*Journal,* 92-93).

H.F's belief that hundreds of thousands of pounds were distributed is a sign of what was required. If forty pounds a year was the minimum subsistence income needed to support a family, then to maintain several hundred thousand poor for six months would need, say, two million pounds or more. That such a sum might be devoted to poor relief in the seventeenth century is fantasy. Bell describes the poor relief during the Plague as 'beggarly to the utmost penuriousness' (Bell 1951:195). He states that the

sums distributed by the City at no time reached more than £1,000 per week, and that only in nine weeks did they exceed half that sum (Bell 1951: 195-196). This suggests a maximum of £17,500 for the six months when the Plague was at its height. This public welfare had to be supplemented by private charity at parish level, and by contributions from the provinces. The inadequacy of provincial charity can be evaluated from the fact that Bristol, the second largest city in England, contributed £205 (Hutton 1985:227).

The difficulties of finding sufficient money for poor relief were overwhelming. The City of London treasury was on the verge of bankruptcy (Reddaway 1940:274). The rich inhabitants of London had evacuated themselves. The income of the City bourgeoisie was interrupted by the stop of trade. And through 1665 into 1667 England was at war with the Dutch. In the autumn of 1665 Charles II raised £1½ million in the House of Commons for the war, but a bill to organise efforts to combat the Plague was lost in the House of Lords (Hutton 1985:233).

It is clear, then, that H.F. wishes to present the management of the City authorities in a good light, but also that he is forced to equivocate, and to present evidence which undermines his own assertions. He wishes to defend his own class, and its magistrates from accusations of failure, or worse, negligence. Behind H.F. we sense the presence of Defoe, concerned not only with 1665, but also 1722. Defoe must present the authorities and the bourgeoisie in a favourable way as an encouraging ideal for his contemporaries, in case the Plague should return to England. But, he must not shirk the grim facts, if his warning of social dislocation is to have any force. It is this tension of interests that makes H.F's *Journal* so uneasily self-contradictory about poor relief.

But H.F. does not always speak with the voice of his class. He can, sometimes, report events from the standpoint of an interest in common human experience, and suffering.

For many pages in the *Journal* H.F. is concerned with the disruption of the routines of London life. Extraordinary events occur on such a scale as to become ordinary. H.F's curiosity is aroused by such events, and he details the 'wonders' to be observed: houses left desolate, streets empty, or with grass growing in them, the delirious wandering about without restraint, people suddenly taken ill, and dying where they fall (*Journal,* 17, 78-79, 100-101, 159-160, 191). While H.F. stays in London for the sake of his business, once the Plague sets in, his business is suspended. He is then free to walk about the streets merely out of curiosity. The Plague acts as a kind of release for him.

Although curiosity sets H.F. observing, his feelings are commonly changed by what he observes. Some of the wonders he recounts are not only striking,

but frightening, or pitiful. We find here another characteristic movement in H.F's mentality. When he risks his life by wandering about the streets, he seems a weak and foolish man, giving into a whim. But, when he encounters a scene of human suffering, the sensibility and seriousness with which he responds to it demand respect. He is no longer just an idler, gratifying his own feelings, but a man of imagination and sympathy, who understands what is most important in human life.

This movement of feeling is seen in H.F's account of the great pit at Aldgate. He tells us, 'I could not resist my Curiosity to go and see it', and he dwells on its size, and the number of bodies buried in it. The sexton of the churchyard suggests to H.F. that his curiosity is not sufficient justification to make the visit. H.F. rationalises that the visit may be instructive, and the sexton sardonically agrees (*Journal,* 58-61). To this point, H.F. seems to be frivolously self-indulgent, and self-deceiving.

But now the episode modulates into tragedy. The dead-cart arrives, and a stranger is seen, gesturing as though in great agony. The buriers suspect that he is one of the delirious:

> When the Buryers came up to him they soon found he was neither a Person infected and desperate . . . or a Person distempered in Mind, but one oppress'd with a dreadful Weight of Grief indeed, having his Wife and several of his Children, all in the Cart, that was just come in with him, and he followed in an Agony and excess of Sorrow. He mourned heartily, as it was easy to see, but with a kind of Masculine Grief, that could not give it self Vent by Tears, and calmly desiring the Buriers to let him alone, said he would only see the Bodies thrown in, and go away, so they left importuning him; but no sooner was the Cart turned round, and the Bodies shot into the Pit promiscuously, which was a Surprize to him, for he at least expected they would have been decently laid in, tho' indeed he was afterwards convinced that was impracticable; I say, no sooner did he see the Sight, but he cry'd out aloud unable to contain himself; I could not hear what he said, but he went backward two or three Steps, and fell down in a Swoon: the Buryers ran to him and took him up, and in a little While he came to himself, and they led him away . . . He look'd into the Pit again, as he went away, but the Buriers had covered the Bodies so immediately with throwing in Earth, that . . . nothing could be seen (*Journal,* 61-62).

The tragic power of this episode is not only in the grief of the mourner, but also in the heart-breaking lack of ceremony that the circumstances of the Plague impose. The bodies must all be buried promiscuously, without reverence, or decency, and when the mourner turns back for a last look, they have already been covered with earth. If tragedy consists in the destruction of something of great human value, then it is correct to find the power of tragedy in the *Journal* (*Journal,* xxii). Here, it is not the destruction of an individual of great stature, but the destruction of relationships of love and solidarity between ordinary people.

The most grievous aspect of the Plague's effect on London is its tendency to increase human alienation. This is seen in people shunning each other to avoid infection, and in the deceit and violence that are produced by shutting

up houses. But, most heart-breaking of all is being unable to give to others, with whom one is intimate, the feeling or the care that is due to them from intimacy. As death, or the impulse to self-preservation, the Plague is a monstrous power unnatural in Shakespeare's sense to break the bonds of human solidarity.[6]

But, if tragedy is present in the events recorded in the *Journal*, it is also baffled by the circumstances of the Plague. There are moments in H.F's narrative where a full tragic response cannot come to maturity. It is thwarted by H.F's recognition of the constraints of the time. Even after the grief of the mourner at the pit has been so movingly presented, H.F's tone changes, as he withdraws into a deadened, even callous acceptance of hard facts. The bodies are shot naked and promiscuously into the pit: '. . . but the Matter was not much to them, or the Indecency much to any one else, seeing they were all dead . . . there was no other way of Burials . . . for Coffins were not to be had for the prodigious Numbers that fell in such a Calamity as this' (*Journal,* 62-63).

H.F's mental withdrawal is a defence against the horror that the Plague brings. But H.F. also sometimes just refuses to recognise what is happening. The profoundest conception of tragedy demands a recognition of evil, as an intransigent power to destroy what is valuable. It demands a clear-sighted recognition of the worst that can happen, a recognition of malignity. This H.F. stubbornly refuses to admit. Throughout the *Journal* the topic is raised of the alleged malicious delight that the infected took in infecting others. H.F. is unwilling to believe this possible:

> . . . those that did thus break out [of shut-up houses], were generally People infected, who in their Desperation, running about from one Place to another, valued not who they injur'd, and which perhaps . . . might give Birth to Report, that it was natural to the infected People to desire to infect others, which Report was really false (*Journal,* 70).

Here H.F. wants to believe that the infected were merely desperate, and infected others involuntarily. However, his uneasiness is indicated by the fact that elsewhere he rejects this explanation, and denies that the sick infected others, even involuntarily (*Journal,* 154-155). Nonetheless, within a few pages, he tells how a plague-victim sexually assaulted a woman who died a few days later (*Journal,* 160). Eventually, H.F. retreats from the issue of malignity: 'I thought [the report] seem'd untrue'. 'I hope [it] was not really true in Fact' (*Journal,* 199-200).

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6 '[The fear of death] took away all Compassion; self Preservation indeed appear'd here to be the first Law'. See *Journal*, p.115. Flanders, *op.cit.*, discusses alienation, pp.154-157, 163-167.

We might think that H.F's anxiety is influenced by class considerations. Given the fact that the Plague attacked the poor most, and that the bourgeoisie feared popular revolt, it is understandable that H.F. should be reluctant to believe in the malignity of the infected. But, such an explanation is perhaps too narrow. A more human explanation would relate to H.F's sense of alienation, the retreat into separateness, and the rupture of the bonds of mutuality. When this is occurring on such a scale, when the value of mutuality is registered in the intensity of the grief at its disappearance, it is not surprising that H.F. should be repelled by the idea of positive malignity. Some horrors of the Plague are too dreadful to contemplate.

But, finally, for our overall impression of the *Journal* we must return to considerations of social class. The *Journal* is at times undoubtedly impressive as the record of a human response to suffering, and the need for mutuality. But, as a whole, its interest lies rather in showing how such a response can be entangled in the attitudes of class consciousness, with the inevitable concomitants of evasiveness and bad faith.

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