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## **Private Meditations and Public History in Daniel Defoe’s *A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR***

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In *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Daniel Defoe’s narrator, H. F., makes the claim that “What I wrote of my private Meditations I reserve for private Use, and desire it may not be made publick on any Account whatever” (65–66). Coming upon this statement, a reader is likely to wonder what differentiates the intimate, autobiographical narrative that has hitherto been the *Journal* from those “private Meditations” that, professedly, have been left out. Traditionally, *A Journal of the Plague Year* has been treated alongside Defoe’s other novels as a record of individual experience and as a formal descendent of the spiritual autobiography. However, Paula Backscheider, in her preface to the Norton Critical Edition, which she also edited, has suggested a reading that gives more weight to the *Journal*’s communal aspects, reminding us that a plague is a “crisis for a community” that “allows no individuals” and “makes all people a community and emphasizes human relationships” (ix). Building on that focus on community, I examine here how Defoe crafts a quasipublic history through a narrator who seems to fear that his own private meditations are insufficient to the task or inappropriate to the purpose of the narrative he is creating. Defoe’s *Journal* provides an early example of a first-person narrative that tells the story of a community rather than of an individual. In exchanging an intimate, personal reflection for a narrative technique that absorbs multiple stories into a single narrative and point of view, Defoe offers readers a new way of thinking about the place of the individual in early eighteenth-century fiction.

The narrator’s statement about the private meditations is odd in many ways. First of all, it comes well into the story, without warning and without

further explanation. Second, a reader would likely never know that those private meditations were missing had H. F. not mentioned them himself. So why mention their omission at all? I argue that it indicates H. F.'s own awareness of his unorthodox use of the journal form to record a public history. He knows what his readers expect but also knows what they need: a testament of the devastation which could have been prevented or which, at the least, could have been better prepared for. Through H. F.'s awareness, Defoe reminds today's readers of a versatility of the journal as a form that we might easily overlook. He also reminds us that such versatility can be put to use by even an ordinary citizen.

In the *Journal*, Defoe's narrator gives the reader a tour of London during the plague outbreak of 1665. Beginning with H. F.'s own struggle to decide whether to stay in the city or to leave, the *Journal* initially appears to fit the same mold as Defoe's other novels by presenting an individual in crisis. However, while H. F.'s anxiety over his own safety lingers throughout the work, he can be seen stepping into the role of a reporter and historian. Though he continues to question his choice to stay in London, he constructs a narrative that includes anecdotal accounts from the people he meets and observes in his wanderings through the city. Rather than report those experiences, Defoe's narrator presents them as his own experiences, and indeed they are. In a text that also includes such evidence of its "factuality" as ledgers accounting for the number of deaths resulting from the plague, Defoe's construction of this narrative elevates personal, observed experience to the same status as factual evidence. The motivation behind H. F.'s desire to write history the way he does is attributable to his sense of the government's failure to protect its citizens from the plague. He states: "But it seems that the Government had a true Account of it, and several Counsels were held about Ways to prevent its coming over; but all was kept very private" (Defoe 5). With government proceedings remaining private, the private history, we might say, of the private citizen goes public in its place. For H. F., that means leaving aside his private meditations, whatever they may be.

For instance, when H. F. observes a mass burial pit, he prioritizes another man's response over his own feelings about the horrific scene. The man, we are told, had gone to see his wife and children buried (Defoe 54–55). When the bodies were "shot into the Pit" rather than "decently laid in," the man "went backward two or three Steps, and fell down in a Swoon" (Defoe 54–55). It is difficult to imagine that H. F. would not also have a visceral reaction to bodies being "shot into" a mass grave; so, perhaps those reflections are the private meditations he has sacrificed to write this

history. By reading this scene in the context of the omission of those private meditations, we come to see that this is not objective reporting but rather sympathetic identification constructed in narrative.

Perhaps the text's most notable example, a story that Defoe refers to as that of "my three Men" (100), also demonstrates the way that he collapses narrative perspectives, inviting readers to understand this text as a public history. In the narrative construction of this story, H. F. acknowledges that the struggle they all face is not for food or life but rather for a sense of belonging and communal response. This becomes clear when one of the men says to another,

Look you Tom, the whole Kingdom is my Native Country as well as this Town. You may as well say, I must not go out of my House if it is on Fire, as that I must not go out of the Town I was born in, when it is infected with the Plague. I was born in England, and have a Right to live in it if I can. (Defoe 102)

Again, it is difficult to imagine that H. F.'s own firsthand experiences would not lead him to voice the same sentiments, but here again Defoe chooses to absorb the voice of the common citizen into his narrator's own history. The passage offers an example of what Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities*, arguing that nations are "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The three men are not mourning the loss of individuals to the plague; rather, they are mourning the loss of a sense of belonging to a community.

In the history H. F. constructs, he rebuilds a community fractured by the plague through the collapsing of individual narrative voices, including his own. In so doing, and in identifying the narrative as a "journal," Defoe provides us with some insight into what a journal could be in the early eighteenth century and the role it played in the development of new types of fiction writing. As J. Paul Hunter explains, the journal originally "emphasized in its origins the centrality for the recording and receiving consciousness of immediate moments in time" and it did that "both in its sense as a public account of daily events and as a private account of personal details in daily life" (172). Adding to this Felicity Nussbaum's description of the journal (and closely related form, the diary) as "representations of our imagined relation to reality, mediated by narrator and reader" (xiii), we see that this is

what Defoe is able to accomplish through his innovative use of the journal form, integrating multiple voices into a single point of view. His narrator's interest in contemporaneity is evident in the way that he provides quantitative evidence of the plague's devastation, reproduces official documents, and elevates personal experience to the status of historical evidence. However, the detailed scenes H. F. describes are his *observations*, not his *experiences*. His "imagined relation to reality" in the midst of this crisis takes shape through his recording of other individuals' experiences; his experience of the plague as documented in the *Journal* may be understood as a reflection of the impact that the experiences of others, even those he did not witness, had on him. For Defoe, the journal is the form that allows for a symbolic rebuilding of community through individual experience.

The text's very structure and narrative oddities, then, demonstrate newly emerging roles of writing in the public sphere. *A Journal of the Plague Year* describes a changing society in the importance it places on community and the role of the unknown, writing citizen within it. As it does so, it presents personal narratives that serve as a public history, challenging our current understandings of such early fiction as Defoe's *Journal* as centered on the directly reported experiences of the individual. This recognition allows us instead to notice its melding of the public and private, individual and communal, autobiographical and historical. Defoe demonstrates in his *Journal* the potential within fiction not only for providing accurate descriptions of human experiences but also for actively participating in these experiences through writing even when they are not "yours."

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