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**Making History Novel: Defoe's *Due Preparations* and
*A Journal of the Plague Year***

Precision is a particular hallmark of Daniel Defoe's writing. If he gives the reader nothing else, he gives details, and in an abundance that sometimes startles. We know more about the particularity of Robinson Crusoe's solitary days than we, perhaps, care to; 180 pages of Crusoe's eye for detail make us abundantly ready for a change, for the companionship of a Friday: we ourselves, weighed down as readers by the verisimilitude of dull isolation, long for an eye that knows nothing of the shopkeeperish sensitivity (or insensitivity if you like) that Crusoe shows for the environment around him. We know too much of the measurable island world within which Crusoe moves and too little of the irrational human world that moves within him. And who is this Robinson Crusoe, we ask at the novel's close (or our students ask with a certain aggressive disenchantment): a chronicler of life, a fact finder, an example of the keen bureaucrat, an observer who looks only outwardly at the world with an incisive distaste for ambiguity and an insatiable craving for facts? Like father like sons: Defoe like his creations seems unable (or unwilling) to tell us much about himself. His eye looks outward on the England and Europe he inhabited and records with fastidiousness the daily life of that culture attributing most of what he writes to the pseudonymous and the fictional, to a cardboard mask often painted with so realistic and defiant a perspective that we take it for an actual human face. But nowhere can we identify the face of Defoe. And seldom can we feel the pulse of a human heart behind his painstaking recreations of events, of environments, of life.

If Defoe teaches us anything in all this, he perhaps unintentionally teaches us to disdain what he seems so to value: hard facts and the details of life, the bottom-line common denominator that one might

reluctantly call "reality." Again like the good bureaucrat (or, for that matter, like the quintessential government agent, the revenue man), Defoe is so good at his reducible and redoundable facts and figures, so committed to death and taxes, that we ultimately find ourselves as readers unable (or unwilling) to pay up.

And the analogy is fair enough: Defoe was a good government man, good enough to serve either government, Tory or Whig, in any capacity it liked and with whatever words suited the "reality" on sale that day. He worked for Robert Harley and for Robert Walpole, and proved a better liar than either. He attacked the fifth estate and he was at the same time its chief benefactor. He was all things to all men and yet no discernible thing in himself. And the only consolation we have in our bewildered attempt to get the real Daniel Defoe to please stand up is our knowledge that his contemporaries too could not disincline him from crouching behind their furniture and in their wardrobes: they seemed to know no better than we who Daniel Defoe really was. Neither did his employers nor his family. One might recall in this context the now well-known letter he wrote from Scotland to Robert Harley while he was on an espionage mission for that Tory parliament man:

I have Compass't my First and Main step happily Enough, in That I am Perfectly Unsuspected as Corresponding with anybody in England. I Converse with Presbyterian, Episcopall-Dissenter, papist and Non Juror, and I hope with Equall Circumspection. I flatter my Self you will have no Complaints of my Conduct. I have faithfull Emissaries in Every Company And I Talk to Everybody in Their Own way. To the Merchants I am about to Settle here in Trade, Building ships &c. With the Lawyers I Want to purchase a House and Land to bring my family & live Upon it (God knows where the Money is to pay for it). To day I am Goeing into Partnership with a Membr of parliamt in a Glass house, to morrow with Another in a Salt work. With the Glasgow Mutineers I am to be a fish Merchant, with the Aberdeen Men a woollen and with the Perth and western men a Linen Manufacturer, and still at the End of all Discourse the Union is the Essentiall and I am all to Every one that I may Gain some (158-159).

While it would be wrong to underestimate the risks Defoe ran as Harley's agent not only in Scotland but also in those English counties and London precincts in which the government desired to test or manipulate popular sentiment, we can also hardly overestimate the pleasure Defoe took in those risks and especially in the role-playing which they necessitated. In a later communication with Harley Defoe is at great pains to reschedule a planned London meeting, substituting

an evening for a morning hour the better to disguise his comings and goings lest anyone think he is not his own man (310-311). And it was principally this shifting of allegiances, this refusal by Defoe to identify and defend his sentiments like a good English gentleman that most troubled his peers, and even such other grand prevaricators as Swift and Pope. Addison's attack on the "false shuffling . . . rascal" is best known because of its source, but that of the tract writer Charles Gildon is most exasperatingly complete:

The Fabulous *Proteus* of the Ancient Mythologist was but a very faint Type of our Hero, whose Changes are much more numerous, and he far more difficult to be constrain'd to his own Shape . . . The *Dissenters* first would claim him as theirs, the *Whigs* in general as theirs, the *Tories* as theirs, the *Non-jurors* as theirs, the *Papists* as theirs, the *Atheists* as theirs, and so on to what Subdivisions there may be among us.¹

Yet we do still appreciate the need for Defoe the professional writer and journalist to hang up many shingles in this precarious period in which patronage was still a necessary economic supplement to popular appeal; but what of the private man, the family man, the father.² Surely there in that role which Defoe so championed in his tracts on domestic life, Proteus would take the solid form of the pater familias, and so it often seems. However, the love Defoe professes for his children knows one real limit: money. Among other instances of shuffled family feelings the most striking appears in a letter to his future son-in-law Henry Baker dated 9 January 1728/29 (?). The two men had been struggling for sometime to resolve a disagreement over Sophia's dowry and not unpredictably Defoe is constantly defending himself in these letters from claims by Baker and his solicitor that the old man has not been true to his word and is impossible to pin down about anything. Is a certain property mortgaged or not? Defoe will admit it is "engaged" and say nothing further. Why will Defoe not accede to the last 5 L (pounds) of the annual settlement in writing? Because he prefers to let a part (even as he says, this petty sum) stand to be paid on his word, his honour, rather than on the cold terms of a contract. But most astonishing is his manipulation of his son-in-law's and his own love for the daughter Sophia. When the issue arises about what should become of the dowry when the wife dies and especially should she pass away early in the marriage, Defoe pleads the inarticulateness of a prospectively grieving parent: "It is a little hard to put a Father to express himself upon it . . . with what Horror (excuse the Word) must I suppose the case [i.e., his daughter's death] before I can argue upon it as a Father. I must suppose My Child lost, dead,

childless. Mr. Baker, who now I *value and shall* (before that) say I *value and love*, lost to me; the Relation sunk out of Nature and embarked perhaps in another Family, how can I look on the rest of my Children disinherited and impoverisht by the double Loss of their Sister and their Fortune! Make the case your own if that be possible. I can say no more! 'tis my Weakness . . ." (466-68).

Well done, indeed. The language is exact in its drama. All the right heart strings are plucked, and in closing Defoe calls upon his correspondent as reader to empathize if he can, to let the words stir emotion in the reader and bring the blood of passionate recognition to merely imagined horror. So Priam to Achilles once in the midst of another kind of bargain over a child. And one wants to experience and not merely trust Defoe's emotions here, to take the rhetoric for truth, the mask of grief for a face streaking with true tears. But Defoe feels the further need to stress the *value* of his love a third time, and adds this postscript: "Pray reflect on the risque on my Side if my Child should drop off in a year or two or less, as often happens" (467). My ducats, my daughter; my daughter, my ducats. In what survives of his correspondence we do meet the real Daniel Defoe, but he is a man of sheaves, not essences; of roles and rhetoric, not identity and truths.

In his capacity as government pamphleteer, Defoe in 1722 undertook an intriguing project: to write a short piece defending the Quarantine Act against the threat of a new plague on the Continent, specifically at Marseilles.³ His purpose is twofold: to defend an unpopular government policy by insisting upon its value to the moneyed, merchant class, and to convince that same body of people so essential to the health of English trade and commerce, that should a plague come upon them they could survive it *without leaving London* and abandoning their trades. It is an insidious form of political rhetoric all too familiar to us: war and pestilence devour chiefly the poor and the insignificant; if you have means and are meaningful to society (if you belong to the middle class) you can build your own bomb shelter and survive the "big one." The document Defoe produced, *Due Preparations for the Coming Plague*, lays all its political cards on the table at the outset: Quarantine is a good thing, only the unethical and the immoral individual, only the pirate and the smuggler would oppose it and try to circumvent it, just as they already scurry around the end of all customs and revenue laws. The ministry thus has the best interests of the legitimate merchant class in mind. Preparations against the coming plague are thus, in fact (if we assent to Defoe's reasoned justification of government), a binding contract between the state and

its special commercial agents: Sir Robert and the middle class share an intimate compact.⁴

Whatever the actual reasons were for the government's commission of *Due Preparations*, those motives are now long lost in the silence of Defoe's paper shredding, and it is only speculation that leads us to the conclusion that the piece was Defoe's response to a political request. But the pamphlet itself is clearly distinguished by the voice of the propagandist, both in its insistence upon the justness of government policies and in its attack upon the policies of other nations, and of France especially (6-10). Here the professional pamphleteer is very definitely speaking, in the present, in 1722, and with an eye to the then current fear of a new plague in Marseilles. While examples and details about the conditions one must overcome and the precautions one must take to survive a return of the infection are drawn from the records and experiences of those who survived in 1665, *Due Preparations* is entirely embraced by the political and social conditions, and the prejudices of the moment in history which produced it. Defoe's imagination is very seldom awakened here; when he describes the survival tactics of two hypothetical middle class families in 1665, he does not bring them alive as individuals. They remain in the first instance a faceless source of examples for Defoe's own researched "facts" about the right precautions against a plague; and in the second they become the ciphers in a minor allegory through which Defoe uses religion (and in particular the low church and dissenting beliefs most common to the merchant class) to manipulate and control the real fears, anxieties, and potential hysteria surrounding his woeful topic.

The document is filled with facts, facts taken in most instances from the material published in 1721 about the Plague of 1665, most of it eye-witness accounts reissued after some sixty years. Even the Bills of Mortality, those peculiar parish roll calls of the dead and their distinguished diseases (an especially engaging sort of bedtime reading) had been reprinted the previous year by an enterprising publisher keen on taking advantage of a public dread and fascination with the spreading rumours and journalistic reports of a new Bubonic presence in France. This was, after all, the age which first brought us the instant book and the novelization: commercial interest was then, as now, more than willing to court and seduce (if not ever marry) the most unattractive of popular distractions and obsessions. Defoe researched his "facts" in these sources, using equally translations of later medical papers on the treatment of victims and bizarre fundamentalist religious allegories from the pen of Restoration ranters.⁵ His own pamphlet is consistently

rhetorical and manipulative: he has no desire to imaginatively recreate the London of 1665; rather his objective is to consume the historical evidence from that earlier time and place, and then regurgitate the masticated and reduced substance as political pap for an economically recognizable maw. The chicks in his nest are easy to identify: they are the London middle class merchants and tradesmen, the commercial wing of the country whose best interests are Walpole's best interests. One can justifiably assume that as the possibility of a return of the plague grew more actual, the government began to fear a mass exodus from London by this very class of people whose flight to the countryside in 1665 had closed the Exchequer and brought the economy to a halt (Pepys' Diary, August 16, 1665). In 1722 with England moving by means of the maritime strength Pepys had developed toward international commercial domination, the last thing Walpole needed under a now highly complex and economically based system of government was a catastrophic disruption of trade and commerce. "Keep the merchants in London, and keep them breathing and smugly content," one can almost hear Walpole briefing his pamphleteer. And Defoe dutifully and effectively responded.⁶

That *Due Preparations* is intended to present the gift and wisdom of history's hindsight exclusively to the middle class is conspicuously evident in the design of the writing. Defoe begins by addressing the problem of the labouring and idle poor in London in time of plague, and suggests that the parish purse should pay for the transfer of the children from such families to country hospitals and other such holding pens, but he offers no advice for the relocation or succour of their parents. They will be needed in London to perform as runners for a self-secluded middle class who must pay someone to inform them about the progress of the plague while they hide away in their well-stocked Bubonic bomb shelters. And the children of the poor safely enclosed in milder country climes will supply the labour stock needed to replace their plague ravished working class parents. Enough said: in ten pages of cursory reference to the poor, Defoe makes the point (15-24).⁷ A provision is made, the conscience fed its sop, and the merchants can return to self-obsession. Such callousness is unlike the Defoe we meet elsewhere, in tracts like the *The Complete English Tradesman* and *The Family Instructor*. The compassion he shows there for the poor and the strong arguments he makes for significant institutions of social welfare are seldom encountered in the sentiments of *Due Preparations*, because the professional prevaricator is at work here, making his daily bread.

While the first section of *Due Preparations* is entirely given over to specific instructions on how to secure the home and stockpile ample provisions against a lengthy period of seclusion, the next two parts describe the experiences of two families who took such precautions in 1665. But that initial section is striking for its details. Defoe tells his reader how covertly to hoard literally tons of flour, preserves, and salted meats, how to acquire such supplies from multiple sources, and how to prevent raiding from the unprepared masses when the plague arrives. In its specificity and its counselling to deceive and be covert, it is surprisingly similar to a pamphlet circulated by the Diefenbaker government in 1960 entitled *Your Basement Fallout Shelter: Blueprint for Survival No. 1*. And that more recent conservative “tract”; like its 18th century predecessor, is also aimed at the middle class who can afford the large cash outlay needed to provide for times of national catastrophe and whose survival is essential to a tax collecting nation. Only those who can afford a future can be cajoled into taking the time to worry about it.

Defoe instructs his readers on the methods for procuring and storing not only essentials like flour and candles, but also fine wines for father and sweet delicacies for mother and child. And when Defoe focuses in on his two hypothetical families, one sheltered in their home, the other on a merchant ship owned by family interests, the controlling metaphor is one of enclosed and conscienceless self-interest. The duly prepared survivors feel little or nothing for those who suffer and die all around them as they watch the horror of a near apocalypse from the safe-house of self-obsession.⁸ The document recognizes, justifies, and nurtures a sense of “them and us,” a class-oriented siege mentality in which those who belong to the right side, the party which will survive, watch passively through a protective window of literal smoke while those others on the wrong side, those who form the party of step-and-fetchits, of ciphers and serfs, die in countless numbers:

The master having resolved thus to shut himself up and all his family . . . he [would not] suffer any of his family so much as to look out of a window into the street, or open any casement, except a wooden window made for the purpose, where the pulley and rope was, and that up two pair of stairs; and this wooden window he caused to be covered with thin plates of latin, or tin,

Whenever this wooden window was opened, he caused a flash of gunpowder to be made in the room, so as to fill it with smoke, which, as soon as the window was opened, would gush out with some force

While this smoke lasted, he that looked out of the window talked with the porter at the gate . . . but if the smoke of the gunpowder abated, he

immediately shut the door till he had made another flash with powder within (49-50).

When the father of Defoe's exemplary family discovers that his watchman will come no more because the plague has claimed him, he has only one regret: that he had neglected to pay the fellow for his service, although, he insists, he had often so intended. He eases his conscience by giving the coins to another member of the porter's fraternity. The rhetorical strategy Defoe employs in *Due Preparations* is a simple one: to make his middle class audience as secure as possible in view of the threat of plague by emphasizing their solidity as an economic group, and secondly to assuage any pangs of conscience in his readers by portraying the lower classes as a faceless and amorphous glut: the middle class he makes a family, the workers a herd. And in neither group does he permit a sense of individual humanity, for he wishes neither group to question the central authority of the inhuman government policies which he as a political insider knows will be enforced should the plague come. Ultimately, *Due Preparations* is an insidiously successful example of the "big lie," a political document that uses the apparent facts of history to lull the populace into a false sense of security, a security based on flattering the moneyed classes and thereby misleading them about the real dangers that surround them and which their government will not admit for fear of compromising its tenuous authority. As with his daughter's dowry, so with Walpole's policies, where money matters Defoe finds ways to alter moral truth and historic fact: debits and credits are beyond the nice sentiments of ethics and morality as the several times bankrupted hosier Defoe well knew.

If *Due Preparations* preys upon fear in the best spirit of "good government" and old-time religion, Defoe's second recreation of the 1665 Plague, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, cultivates fear in a radically different and more complexly humane way. In the *Journal*, Defoe brings another sort of fiction to bear on history's nebulous facts. The political posturing of *Due Preparations* gives way in the *Journal* to an exercise in empathetic literary representation. This time Defoe does not so much deliberately misrepresent historical events; rather he makes the old new, makes history novel by imaginatively recreating what took place in the past and entering emotionally and psychologically into the factual account of what once happened without any political or interpretive bias, so as to make a present experience and a new reality out of a cold chronicle. Where *Due Preparations* was very

much a work focused on the political necessities of 1722 despite all of its researches into the events of 1665, the *Journal* is so imaginatively present in the past, so much an evocation of 1665, that it contradicts if not totally undermines the political intentions of the earlier pamphlet. The *Journal* destroys the protection of group identification by treating all classes equally as individuals, and as individuals alive and alone in their anxieties and insecurities. Here in the *Journal* there is no supreme authority, no Walpole, no government, no church, no pastor, under whose autocracy to place the unwanted responsibility of personal choice. There is no removed and austere yet firm fatherly voice in the *Journal* to emulate the rhetoric of *Due Preparations*; here is only grief, alienation, and abandonment. Even the simple and self-serving belief in God which sustained the second family in *Due Preparations* disappears in the implications of the *Journal*, to be replaced only by tremulous doubt.

The key to the *Journal* is its use of personae. H.F., the ostensible writer of the piece, living in the plague-infected London of 1665, loses his identity as merchant and moves through the responsibility of magistrate to a final condition of solitary despair. At first a self-interested saddler (as a businessman he is much like the father in *Due Preparations*, though H.F. is himself a bachelor), the narrator is appointed a parish officer with the charge of shutting up infected houses, thereby condemning the healthy inhabitants to perish along with the diseased. Here is a merchant compelled to see the effects of harsh government policies first hand, and H.F. speaks out against the measures which Defoe had only months before defended in *Due Preparations* (71). In moving from a commercial to a magisterial role, H.F. begins to observe more intensely the individual suffering in London and at that point, as he begins to question his government's response to the crisis, he becomes alien himself. Once H.F. doubts policy, he begins to see in the deadly figures in the Bills of Mortality real people dying, and especially the deaths of the defenceless, of the poor, and of women and children. In a significant way, the structure of the *Journal* depends upon the motif of innocent suffering in the form of the child and the mother (especially pp. 115-120), the two members of the family given no significant role in *Due Preparations*.

At the outset of the *Journal* H.F. watches while his married brother leaves London in order to protect his family at the expense of abandoning his business (later H.F. witnesses its looting, 86-87); but the bachelor remains to administer and shield his establishment. Then, in perhaps the best known section of the *Journal*, H.F. observes a father

weeping while his whole family is unceremoniously dumped into the infamous burial pit at Aldgate. After this point H.F.'s interest in the Mortality Bills begins to focus more exclusively on the numbers of children killed by the plague, on infant mortality, and on child-bed deaths. At the veritable structural midpoint of the *Journal*, Defoe reprints two pages of such figures (116-117), after which the anecdotes and incidents related in the book's second half deal mostly with episodes describing the destruction of families and the most basic human bonds of love and nature by the ravages and hysteria induced by the plague. The *Journal* moves from the implication to the explicit statement that there are no genuinely due preparations against the plague if one stays in London. No authority no matter how caring or responsible, how powerful or competent can protect those under its charge. No government can sustain its people, no father preserve his family, H.F. tells us:

Fathers and mothers have gone about as if they had been well, and have believed themselves to be so, till they have insensibly infected and been the destruction of their whole families, which they would have been far from doing if they had the least apprehensions of their being unsound and dangerous themselves. A family, whose story I have heard, was thus infected by the father, and the distemper began to appear upon some of them even before he found it upon himself; but searching more narrowly, it appeared he had been affected some time, and as soon as he found that his family had been poisoned by himself he went distracted (201-202).

Here and elsewhere H.F. openly contradicts the pronouncements of *Due Preparations* as when he states that the policy of shutting up the houses and effecting quarantine are a kind of unnatural "imprisoning . . . of little or no service in the whole" (71) because they ignore the consoling needs of human nature.

In the *Journal of the Plague Year* Defoe does what he could not in *Due Preparations*; he uses history not to justify present concerns and practices but to criticize and even condemn the present state of things. He achieves this more radical objective by entering imaginatively into the experiences of the past, rather than forcing past human actions to suit an inflexibly political rhetoric of the present. Intuitively, it would seem that in the *Journal* Defoe treats his researches as Herodotus does; while in *Due Preparations* his designs are more recognizably akin to the attitude Thucydides brings to manipulating history. In the *Journal* Defoe distrusts the political word and informed speech even to the extent of beginning his second history of the plague by subtly but

surely criticizing the morality of the public position that had informed *Due Preparations*. In the *Journal* Defoe displays a literary talent that is capably negative, an empathetic imagination that is curiously strong enough to be submissive and to refuse the principle of domination that marks *Due Preparations*. The difference between these two works is one of rhetoric and strategy. In *Due Preparations* Defoe compels history forward as a servant to the present; in the *Journal* he allows the present to go back and inhabit the past.

The opening paragraph of the *Journal* actually contains the very criticism of *Due Preparations* that is most telling. There Defoe in the voice of H.F. writing supposedly in 1665 attacks those journalists (some readers think he has Sir Robert L'Estrange's *Intelligencer* in mind⁹) who misled the public about the severity of the infection and misrepresented the death count in the Mortality Bills. But implied here too, in the present context, in the year of Defoe's writing, in the year of the new plague of 1722, is a self-directed criticism; for Defoe, in his first pamphlet, in the *Due Preparations*, was in his own words from the *Journal* guilty of spreading false "reports of things [in order] to improve them by the invention of men" (1). If all histories are kinds of lying, it is better that we know who the liars are.

NOTES

1. Quoted by David Blewett, *Defoe's Art of Fiction*, 11.
2. It is unfortunate that so little is known about Defoe's private life, especially his relationship with his children. In this he is like Dryden, and one wonders (at times naively as well as blindly) about the biographic contexts for certain recurrent themes in the writing. In Defoe's late prose works, for instance, *Crusoe*, *The Journal*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*, the theme of the lost child becomes increasingly central. If we grant the status of surrogate son to Friday, then an intriguing progression arises, moving from Crusoe/Friday through the child/mother passages of *The Journal*, to Moll and her incestuous son and ending with Roxana and her daughter. One wonders (admittedly without prospect of a solution) why this theme so obsesses Defoe at the end of his career, and more importantly why it becomes the central concern of the works he wrote as "novels."
3. The first act of quarantine against the plague was taken by Queen Anne's government in 1710. It was reintroduced in 1721 and created a stir of resentment because of its seemingly inconsistent enforcement. The burning of two ships from Cyprus along with their cargoes of cotton goods especially raised alarm among traders and merchants.
4. In April 1721 Walpole became First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer; with the South Sea scheme still threatening Bank and East India Stock, it was imperative that Walpole reassure the merchant class. The coming plague was a much irritating rub.
5. Defoe's sources for *Due Preparations* were the same as those for the *Journal*: chiefly *The Weekly Bills of Mortality*, Dr. Nathaniel Hodges' *Loimologia*, and Thomas Vincent's *God's Terrible Voice in the City*. All these works were reissued in 1721 to take advantage of a growing concern with the new plague.

6. Where the *Journal* is always sceptical of government policies, *Due Preparations* unequivocally supports any loss of liberty that benefits the financial interests of the merchant classes.
7. The organization of *Due Preparations* is unlike *A Journal* in this key respect: Defoe deals only briefly with the effects of plague on the masses and deals with this at the outset of the work; the bulk of his text is reserved for describing the survival of the two middle class families who are removed from the horror of the plague by the careful "fortification" of their homes. Here, perhaps, Defoe's imaginative description of how the first family fortified themselves against the plague suggests real parallels with Crusoe's fortifications against "nature" on his island.
8. In the second family of *Due Preparations*, the central character is more concerned for her own soul than for the physical suffering of her fellow creatures. This is quite unlike H.F. in *A Journal* whose initial self-assurance is quite overcome by an obsession with the physical horrors that surround him.
9. See Louis Landa's notes and Introduction to the Oxford edition of the *Journal*.

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