

Constructing authenticity



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In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe uses several methods to create convincing history out of fiction. In developing a false journal entry, Defoe creates authenticity primarily through the narrator, H. F.. The style and language of H. F.'s supposed journal play a large part in constructing authenticity. But beyond these aspects of the narration is the development of H. F.'s own story. Although the personality of this narrator is not always strong or clear, Defoe succeeds in strengthening the authenticity of the "journal" through aspects of H. F.'s character. Defoe explores H. F.'s emotions and motivation to make him more real. He must convince the reader that there is a living person behind this story, with reasons for writing it down, and a place in its events. The existence and credibility of this human presence are central in Defoe's quest to construct authenticity. Many stylistic aspects of the novel contribute to a sense of reality. The outpouring of disgusting, painful, and tragic information creates an effect that mimics the overwhelming emotional trauma of the plague. By providing answers in advance to any plausible questions with this excess of information, Defoe almost invites the reader to challenge H. F.'s credibility. Defoe plants false evidence with mathematical charts and diagrams to support all of H. F.'s claims. He even includes supposed government documents from the time, with dates to even further promote a sense of reality. For example, the existence of dates in H. F.'s claim that "These orders of my Lord Mayor's were published, as I have said, the latter end of June, and took place from the 1st of July..." (57) is more important than their authenticity. Defoe is creating an official tone to deter doubt or questioning. Subtle hints that constantly defend the truth of H. F.'s tale can be found in Defoe's use of language. Amid the outpouring of disturbing stories and terrifying fact, Defoe

structures H. F.'s sentences to remind the reader of H. F.'s physical presence at the time of these events. Throughout the book, sentences are broken by these reminders. Almost any fact relayed is accompanied by the presence of one such statement, always involving the first person. Brief moments like “ One of the worst days we had in the whole time, as I thought, was...” (118) or “ I say, let any man consider...” (113) or “ here I must observe,” (95) match all of the fact and detail with a person. And the presence of a human story behind all of this factual evidence greatly supplements the sense of reality. To present a distinctly human story, Defoe must present a distinctly human H. F.. Defoe uses emotions to carefully craft H. F.'s authenticity as an actual human being. H. F.'s emotion is sparingly revealed, when he is realizing the manifestations of the plague, or reacting to specific events. In such instances, Defoe deals a double blow: He includes H. F.'s physical presence in the story while also inciting pity in the reader. This is a key emotion in connecting with H. F., as a human character, who proves he can suffer as any human does. The reader pities H. F., and therefore identifies with him, when he explains “ I must acknowledge that this time was terrible, that I was sometimes at the end of all my resolutions, and that I had not the courage that I had at the beginning.”(189) In a book of disturbing stories, it is very convincing to find the narrator caught up in a moment of emotion. After hearing the devastating tale of a poor man's dying family, H. F. explains that “ I saw the tears run very plentifully down his face; and so they did down mine too, I assure you.” (122) Instead of simply telling us a story, or telling us of someone else telling a story, H. F. is now telling us of himself hearing a story. And H. F.'s pain in both experiencing and retelling the plague makes his voice ultimately more human. Most of the information that

Defoe gives about this human story exists to make the account seem more real. One of H. F.'s most consistent characteristics, as the supposed writer, is his careful distinction between truth and rumor. This is an especially subtle method of building the credibility of the journal as historic truth. H. F. gives most of his anecdotes a background, explaining that “[t]his I also had from his own mouth,” (106) or “as I was told,” (109) or even combining “by what I saw with my eyes and heard from other people that were eye-witnesses.” (116) If the narrator is so entirely preoccupied with distinguishing between what is observed, and therefore solid truth and what is less trustworthy, the impulse to question this supposed observed truth is distracted and diminished. It seems unlikely that the narrator would take such pains with citing his sources if these sources didn’t even exist. H. F. sometimes even presents his journal as a sort of attempt to provide truth, explaining that “[t]he plague was itself very terrible, and the distress of the people very great, as you may observe of what I have said. But the rumour was infinitely greater...” (225) Defoe is sly in including honesty as one of H. F.’s preoccupations. The narrator does not simply tell the truth. He is also supposedly determined to destroy anything false. H. F.’s own obsession with authenticity and credibility further masks the fiction of the tale. By setting up reasons for the journal to exist, or motives behind H. F.’s diligent recordings, there is even more history to this document. Defoe presents H. F. as an impulsive observer, or researcher, driven to learn all he can. In several instances, the reader is allowed a glance into H. F.’s task, and explanation of his purpose. In a moment of emotion, as he remembers the sounds of crying in the streets, H. F. exclaims “If I could but tell this part in such moving accents as should alarm the very soul of the reader, I should rejoice that I

recorded those things, however short and important.” (120) He is haunted by all of these facts and tales, and has no choice but to try and make the world understand. Once again, the reader empathizes with H. F., and a more complete and convincing character emerges. Defoe weaves together a world of facts, a present and involved narrator, and an existing writer’s quest to create an actual and convincing plague year. What is perhaps most convincing, though, is the misleading title page, which claims that this novel is “ A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials, Of the most Remarkable Occurrences, As well Publick as Private, Which happened in London During the last Great Visitation In 1665.” Not only does Defoe’s title mask the falsity of what follows in a flowery proclamation, but explains that the author is “ a Citizen who continued all the while in London.” Before the reader is subject to Defoe’s fooling style, or H. F.’s personality, the packaging seduces. By promising initially that what follows is truth, Defoe succeeds in shading everything with this sentiment. At some point, the reader surrenders to Defoe’s efforts, and the plague becomes as real and overwhelming as H. F. claims he wishes it to seem.