A Journal of the Plague Year

A Journal of the Plague Year, published in 1722, can claim with some justification to be the first historical novel in the English language. Its title-page proclaims it to be ‘Observations or Memorials of the most Remarkable Occurrences, as well Public as Private, which happened in London during the last Great Visitation in 1665: Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London’. Defoe was such a skilful journalist that he succeeds in creating an illusion of authenticity, so much so that many contemporary readers accepted the Journal at face value as an eye-witness account written at the time of the Great Plague. Even today it is easy to make the same mistake, lulled by Defoe’s expertise as a literary counterfeiter into a total suspension of disbelief.

A moment’s reflection will demonstrate that the book cannot be what it purports to be. The Great Plague of London took place in 1665, when Defoe was five years of age. Though he may well have had vivid memories of sights and sounds of the time, and his parents and relatives almost certainly told him their recollections – such a traumatic event must have been a topic of conversation for many years afterwards, a child of that age cannot have witnessed the Plague with the intensity of detail evinced in the Journal. In any event it seems probable that Defoe was evacuated from London for the duration of the epidemic. We know that he had an uncle named Henry Foe who was, like Defoe’s narrator ‘H. F.’, a Whitechapel saddler (he died in 1674) and it seems likely that the Journal is based in part on his reminiscences. It is therefore important to understand what the Journal is and what it is not. Despite all indications to the contrary, it is not what it appears to be: a contemporary account written by a single observer who personally witnessed the events he describes. It is, rather, an imaginative reconstruction based partly on Defoe’s memories, partly on accounts passed to him in later years by relatives and friends, and partly on written sources such as The Weekly Bills of Mortality and Nathaniel Hodges’s contemporary report Loimologia. In common with Orwell’s Down and Out in Paris and London, it is a literary re-creation of events and
anecdotes culled from a variety of sources and woven into a coherent and vivid narrative.

But a mere hoax – comparable to Poe’s accounts of an ascent to the moon or a crossing of the Atlantic by balloon – would not have attained the status enjoyed today by A Journal of the Plague Year. It is widely acknowledged as one of the most compelling accounts of disaster in all literature and has exercised a seminal influence on the novel of survival. What gives the book its distinctive quality is its extraordinary air of veracity and the apparent ease with which Defoe evokes the feel of a city in the grip of calamity. Its apparent lack of literary pretension is deceptive. Anthony Burgess has said of Defoe that ‘his novels are too much novels to seem like novels; they read like real life’. He adds: ‘The art is too much concealed to seem like art and hence the art is frequently discounted.’

The Journal abounds in phrases designed to convince the reader that the narrator is describing scenes and incidents witnessed with his own eyes. Expressions such as ‘There was one unhappy Citizen, within my Knowledge’, ‘This was a most grievous and afflicting thing to me, who saw it all from my own Windows’, ‘In these walks I had many dismal Scenes before my Eyes’, ‘I remember, and while I am writing this Story I think I hear the very Sound of it’ create an atmosphere of truthfulness and immediacy. The reader has a sense of involvement, of being a participant in an authentic contemporary narrative. Continually, H. F. employs phrases suggesting personal knowledge: ‘there were innumerable Instances of it, and I could name several in my Neighborhood’; ‘one family... not far from me’; ‘I was indeed shocked with this Sight’; ‘It often pierc’d my very Soul to hear the Groans and Crys of those who were thus tormented’. There is a powerful sense of H. F. as an honest authorial voice, at pains to establish the truth of a disaster which at times overwhelms him in its horror. he emerges as a character in his own right, compassionate, sceptical and judicial, determined to convey the magnitude of a disaster almost beyond his understanding.

The tone is established from the first sentence: ‘It was about the Beginning of September 1664, that I, among the Rest of my Neighbours, heard in ordinary Discourse, that the Plague was returned again in Holland....’ These opening words, at once calm and portentous, lead to an introductory survey of the epidemic, outlining its outbreak and growth parish by parish and the insidious spread of rumour and alarm. The apparently casual phrase ‘I,