Despite the almost two hundred years that separate their publication, and the obvious differences in their authors’ personal circumstances, *Ulysses* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* occupy a similarly unique position in the history of the novel in English. Both narratives display an outstanding amount of factual data in their composition. Both strive to represent the myriad aspects of life in a city. Both their authors share similar concerns in the arrangement and organisation of their materials. Moreover, their arrangement and organisation render them problematic when set in the context of a tradition of novelistic practice centered around the nineteenth-century realist novel. The parallels between two fictions whose authors are historically perceived to be so different, prompt the question of how to read these works, from what perspective to approach them, and whether or not their similarities are rooted in any social or epistemological correspondences in Defoe’s and Joyce’s backgrounds. My main intention is to contend that this is the case, and in this I agree with Michael McKeon when he states that “novels both structure the way history is experienced and take their shape from that experience” (McKeon, 1991, p. 238). For this reason, I will contend that both the archival nature (memory) and the experimental form of these narratives (imagination) lie behind their authors’ attempt at making sense of their social and epistemological background. In this sense, we can discover overarching links between a pioneering classic of the novel such as *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and a canonical twentieth-century avant-garde work like *Ulysses*; links that can be obscured by our contemporary novelistic expectations, strongly influenced by the nineteenth-century realist novel.

The English writer Charles Lamb defined the experience of reading Defoe’s fiction as “like reading evidence in a court of justice” (Watt, 1995, p. 34). In the light of this aphorism readers of Defoe will recall the immense body of factual detail, the long and exhaustive enumerations that distinguish his writings. Perhaps no other fictional work of his exemplifies better this tendency to catalogue than *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a novel swamped by fact and ciphers, researched by its author with painstaking dedication in an attempt at distilling his narrative out of hard fact. The proliferation of historical and physical data in his works has no doubt contributed to establish Defoe’s reputation as one of the first English writers “to have visualised the whole of his narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment” (Watt, 1995, p. 26). That is, if we are to
follow Watt’s analysis in *The Rise of the Novel*, it has lifted his fictional works above the scornful evaluation of his educated contemporaries and immediate successors to place him at the beginning of the realist tradition. However, at this point it might be valuable to consider carefully what is understood by Watt as realism: central to his theories in *The Rise of the Novel* is the idea of the emergence of a literate urban middle class for which writers like Defoe would have catered with fictions that they could find relevant to their interests and aspirations. It would seem from this perspective that Defoe was crafting his narratives to satisfy this emergent body of readers, consciously constructing stories that resembled real life. In other words, Defoe would have written his narratives intending them to resemble the truth. However, Defoe’s own ideas on how to reconcile truth and its narrative counterpart would indicate that he considered this attempt at verisimilitude somehow problematic. This is reflected in the following statement:

> to relate real stories with innumerable Omissions and Additions: I mean, stories which have a real Existence in Fact, but which by the barbarous way of relating, become as romantick and false, as if they had no real Original [...] nothing is more common than to have two Men tell the same story quite differing from one another, yet both of them eye-witness to the Fact related (quoted in McKeon, 1991, p. 113)

From this statement it is not difficult to infer that Defoe’s understanding of how to present ‘truth’ in writing is far more sophisticated than it would appear to the novice reader of his works. It is the mediation between author and material that preoccupies him, as he comes to the realisation that the difficulties that the writer faces in his attempt at providing the substance of truth are “endemic to the activity of reporting” (McKeon, 1987, p. 120). That is to say, contrary to what Watt’s theory would seem to imply, Defoe was intent on making his narratives seemingly verifiable, rather than making them resemble the truth, the latter being clearly the intention behind realism.

At this point we might want to consider the reasons behind Defoe’s preoccupation with the narrative representation of objective truth. In *The Origins of the English Novel* Michael McKeon has masterfully discussed the implications of the early eighteenth-century controversies regarding the contemporary process of capitalist secularisation in English society. Rather than being immersed in the self-assured triumphalism of an emerging middle class that Watt proposes in his analysis, he contends that early eighteenth-century writers like Defoe were intent on reconciling spiritual truth as envisioned by Calvinism with capitalist material gain, as well as being engaged in the new trend for empiricism sponsored by the Baconian revolution. In this last respect McKeon suggests Defoe as a practitioner of what he calls ‘naïve empiricism’, that is, Defoe would be reacting against previous ‘romantic’ ideological representations, without benefiting from a more conservative scepticism as to the new methodologies. The rift that we find at the centre of Defoe’s writings, the one that partially earned him the reputation of being a careless writer, would then be rooted in the unstable nature of early
eighteenth-century social categories and epistemological methodology. As such, Defoe emerges as an exemplary representative of this intellectual crisis.

We can now regard the massive body of factual evidence in *The Journal of the Plague Year* from a different perspective, and consider how Defoe tries to bridge the gap between the historical event that frames his narrative (the Great London Plague of 1665) and its fictionalisation. With this intention it might be useful to reconsider Lamb’s aphorism: it seems to me that the key word in Lamb’s statement is the word ‘evidence’. This word would seem to imply that these narratives somehow demand to be verified, cross-referenced, interpreted, almost in the legalistic manner that the sentence evokes. We should notice here that ‘evidence’, as we understand it in legal terms, has a fixed entity, has been frozen in time, so to speak. Defoe, the thoughtful mediator between his material and his narratives, would have considered how to present and structure this ‘evidence’, how to freeze his data for the contrastive perusal of his readership. The medium that enables him to turn his narrative into a seemingly verifiable account is none other than print. As Michael McKeon points out:

> the very conception of an ‘objective history’ owes a great deal to print technology. By permanently presenting and reproducing what could be no more than transient productions in oral and even scribal culture, print stabilized culture itself and the past in particular as a realm of experience henceforth susceptible to objective study [...] (McKeon, 1987, p. 43)

The repercussions of the typographical revolution on Defoe’s attempts at organising his materials help to explain the anecdotal manner, episodic construction, and unstable organisation of a narrative like *A Journal of the Plague Year*, as well as offering new insights into the hostile evaluation that Defoe’s narratives were to receive from practitioners of the fully established realist novel in the nineteenth century. Thus Henry James’s negative appreciation of Defoe’s writings as having “no authority, no persuasive or convincing force” (Edel & Ray, 1985, p. 67) can be better understood in the context of a novelistic practice, to which James belongs, that does not have to contend with unstable social and epistemological categories. It is “the difficulty of imagining the ultimate social coherence that nineteenth-century novelists took for granted” (Richetti, 1997, p. 121), as well as the problematic aspects of representing that lack of social (and ideological) coherence, that make Defoe’s narratives difficult to digest for a reader who regards nineteenth-century novels as a pinnacle in the history of the genre.

It is my belief that the theoretical accounts that qualify Defoe’s narratives as examples of the proto-realist novel might be simplifying their complexity; this simplification being very much indebted to an evaluation of the nineteenth-century realist novel as a climatic point in the development of the genre. In reconciling the unstable nature of the social and epistemological background behind Defoe’s narratives with the advent of print and the possibilities that this historical event afforded him in his attempt at resolving this instability, we can move from a linear understanding of the history of the novel form, and envision an approach that would enable us to view how novels “both
structure the way history is experienced and in turn take their ‘own’ shape from that experience” (McKeon, 1991, p. 238).

In this sense, Virginia Woolf’s assertion about modernist fiction that “We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition” (Faulkner, 1986, p. 127), can be understood in the context of a twentieth-century ‘crisis of truth’. It might be useful here to recall the modernist dissatisfaction with the realist novelists’ efforts at ‘holding a mirror up to nature’ in the construction of their narratives. This dissatisfaction is rooted in a suspicion that the claims to realistic representation held by their predecessors are tainted with the self-assurance of a strong commanding authorial voice, one that offers a univocal transcription of that reality that they set themselves to represent with a faithful adherence to the ‘truth’. As such, the realists’ novelistic activities are perceived by the modernists as a fallacy, a distortion that passes itself as a failure-proof method of representing human experience.

Virginia Woolf was indeed partly responsible for the raising of Defoe’s reputation after two centuries of neglect. She devoted a chapter of The Common Reader to Defoe’s works, and in stating that “it never occurred to us that there was such a person as Defoe” (Woolf, 1929, p. 121), granted him the rare compliment of denying that very quality that the commanding nineteenth-century realist writer held most dear: an authoritative voice. Woolf was not alone in her appreciation of Defoe: in the academic year 1911-12, Joyce delivered two lectures at the Università Popolare Triestina, under the title ‘Verismo ed idealismo nella letteratura inglese (Daniele Defoe-William Blake)’ / ‘Realism and Idealism in English Literature (Daniel Defoe / William Blake)’. Joyce’s lecture on Defoe is very elucidating as to his particular reading of the latter author’s works, and for that reason I think that it is worth considering its content in some detail.

Although Joyce’s analysis does not escape certain commonplace or negative evaluations of Defoe’s narratives, as when he refers to Defoe’s “matter of fact realism” (Joyce, 1967, p. 12), or, agreeing with Leslie Stephen, lists a few of his deficiencies stating that his fictional works “fall short in love plot, psychological analysis, and the studied balance of character” (ibid., p. 15), it is when he tackles particular works by Defoe that we can sense an affinity between Defoe’s productions and his own. Thus in referring to The Storm, he praises Defoe’s compositional methods by asserting that: “in the end the object of the chronicler has been achieved. By dint of repetitions, contradictions, details, figures, noises, the storm has come alive, the ruin is visible” (ibid., p. 16).

Far from assuming that Defoe’s inventorying is the result of neglect, or equating it with a primitive understanding of composition, Joyce is appreciative of its narrative achievements. Moreover, as Joseph Prescott has pointed out, the way in which Joyce “emphasises Defoe’s gift for vivifying narrative by the massive accumulation of factual data” (ibid., p. 3) suggests his own similar gifts as a writer. Indeed, Joyce’s readers could
not fail to recognise most of the devices listed above as central to the composition of *Ulysses*.

Equally interesting is his assertion that “beneath the rude exterior of Defoe’s characters” the reader “will find an instinct and a prophecy” (*ibid.*, p. 23). It is the symbolist in Joyce who is at work here, and this ‘prophetic’ quality he explores further when he states that “English feminism and English imperialism already lurk in these souls” (*ibid.*, p. 23), thus shrewdly anticipating much modern criticism devoted to *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

This conclusion is hardly surprising when we consider that Joyce starts his lecture neatly tying the arrival of William D’Orange in British shores, with a celebration of English identity: a celebration, he remarks, mirrored in Defoe’s fiction. In this sense his praise of Defoe as being the first English writer “…to infuse into the creatures of his pen a truly national spirit” (*ibid.*, p. 7), which in his analysis is juxtaposed to Defoe’s pioneering in devising “…for himself an artistic form without precedent” (*ibid.*), might recall in the reader the Quaker librarian’s innocent assertion in *Ulysses* that “Our national epic has yet to be written…” (Joyce, 1992, p. 246). Rather than considering Joyce’s laudatory comments on Defoe’s innovations as a salutation on the birth of the novel, it might be more profitable to interpret them in relation to Joyce’s own concerns: the dignification of human experience at its most banal, the inclusion of the myriad aspects of reality that conform to such an experience, his desire to articulate an Irish ‘conscience’ as yet ‘uncreated’, and the realisation that in his quest for this particular truths he would have to mould a narrative form capable of encapsulating them.

If, as Declan Kiberd points out in *Inventing Ireland*, “Joyce would equate realism with the imperial/nationalist narrative” (Kiberd, 1995, p. 339), it is worth noting here that Defoe is only coming to terms, as best as he can, with the social changes that underline his narratives. Joyce has fully realised this in describing Defoe’s writings as prophetic, for a prophecy at the time of its formulation remains to be fulfilled. In recognising that Defoe’s writings mirror this transition he is excluding their validation in terms of the self-assured nineteenth-century novel. In regard to the use of the realist novel to chronicle the fate of the European bourgeoisie, Kiberd argues that the Irish experience is not comparable to that of other cultures as an Irish middle class was not yet fully formed (Kiberd, 1995, p. 339). We can equate this inadequacy of the nineteenth-century novel as an articulator of the Irish experience with Defoe’s own attempts at finding an adequate medium to articulate the ‘truths’ of an as yet not fully formed English middle class.

In the light of the above, Joyce’s appraisal of the narrative in *A Journal of the Plague Year* as possessing “…something masterly […] and orchestral about it” (Joyce, 1962, p. 17) is a good indicator of Defoe’s method of composition as integrating a multitude of elements counterpointed to produce an overall effect. H. F., the anonymous saddler who serves as a narrator in this work, would simply be articulating all those elements. It is important here to note that Defoe has chosen the journal form as a model
for his narrative, not only, I believe, because this particular narrative mode was favoured
by the Protestant practice of religious introspection, and would have come naturally to
Defoe as a dissenter, but also because a journal is by its very nature a written account.
The very fact that Defoe has chosen to title his forged account “A Journal...”, as opposed
to “The Journal...”, is an indication of his awareness of the narrative’s status as a
document amongst many possible others. All this helps to explain H. F.’s anxiety to
report incidents as faithfully as possible, with the acute awareness of the chronicler who
knows all too well that he is producing a document left open for the reader to verify.

It is, perhaps, the discordance between the personal narration that underlies the
journal form, and its public counterpart as a written document that results in the
contradictions at the heart of Defoe’s narrative. The magnified exhibition of the private
in a public form might be behind some of the outrage with which Ulysses was received
by some of Joyce’s contemporaries, who might have found the idea of writing ‘a moral
chapter’ in the history of Ireland by disclosing the toilet habits of its inhabitants
somehow distasteful. Thus D. H. Lawrence remarked on Joyce’s “journalistic dirty-
minedness” (cit. Kiberd, 1992, p. xviii), a complaint that echoes some of the objections
raised by Defoe’s contemporaries about his undiscerning hack-writing.iii

Considering that Lawrence himself was a target of censorship because of the
‘obscene’ content of his novels, it seems to me that his accusation is more focused on
what he perceives as ‘journalistic’ in Ulysses, than on its supposed ‘dirty-mindedness’. It
is the idea of deeming the smallest detail deserving of posterity that seems to irk the
English writer. Joyce has gone a step further from the carefully pruned realist novel, and
as a result he is perceived as having lost control of the medium. It was only when he was
fully understood to be operating outside the realist canon that his efforts were received
with tolerance and admiration, as when in his seminal essay ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’
103), as a motivation behind Ulysses’ structure.

We know, thanks to Frank Budgen, of Joyce’s “magpie method” in gathering
materials for his narratives and Richard Ellmann has told us of Joyce’s painstaking
efforts at documenting his fictions by way of arduous research. Thus we can concur with
Hugh Kenner when he states that:

Ulysses itself is certainly the forgery Joyce later called it in Finnegans Wake, joining in some ideal
archive the hundreds of other printed documents June 16, 1904, has left behind (Kenner, 1962, p.
50).

There is a sense, then, in which Ulysses, like A Journal of the Plague Year, is demanding
to be verified by its readers. The difference between Defoe and Joyce being, of course,
that the first naively believes in his own forgery, while the second is all too aware of the
artificial nature of all documents. It is this awareness of the possibilities of print that
allows Joyce to arrange his text in a discontinuous manner, offering snippets of
information that acquire their real significance by way of retrospective re-assemblage. The readers of *A Journal of the Plague Year* will recognise in this method their own efforts at putting together the mortality bills, rules and regulations, religious and pseudo-scientific explanations, oral, and written accounts that populate H. F.’s thoughtful narration.

*Ulysses* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* stand, then, as forged documents that recall attention to their form, to the fact that they are cultural artefacts. This might be the reason behind some of the difficulties that the reader accustomed to nineteenth-century novels has to face when approaching either of these narratives. If the nineteenth-century novelists, as Hugh Kenner points out, took for granted “a printed book whose pages are numbered [...] as simply the envelope for their wares” (Kenner, 1962, p. 34), both Joyce and Defoe self-consciously exploit the printed book, taxing their readers with a responsibility that would have been felt as quite inappropriate by the canonical realist writer.

Both Joyce’s and Defoe’s inventorying reflect their characters’ desire to fix the uncertainty of their social medium. As H. F. sees the boundaries of normality blurred by the spectre of the plague, he has every reason to fear for the survival of his community. The anonymity of this kind and practical individual further stresses the fact that Defoe’s emphasis is in defining what constitutes the make-up of a healthily functioning society. A definition that his contemporaries might have found equally necessary. It is by means of parading through the streets of Dublin the very ordinariness of Bloom, whose qualities of tolerance and civicmindedness stand up to those of H. F., that Joyce tests the health of Irish society. The results are quite drab, as Bloom becomes the object of the muted or plainly outraged misunderstanding of his fellow citizens.

The distrust with which he is perceived by most of the characters in the book is at the core of that social uncertainty that lurks behind *Ulysses’* structure. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H. F.’s perambulations around London offer the desolate spectacle of a society which has realised that contagion starts with trust: the grass growing on the cobblestones, the masses of people walking in the middle of the streets to avoid passing infected houses, and the red crosses marking the doors of the diseased are all muted symbols of the desecration of public interaction. If in *Ulysses* this desecration is far less dramatic, it is by no means less important. A library, a newspaper, several pubs, a hospital are the sites for the exchange of its characters’ cultural and political beliefs, a museum serves as a hiding place, a brothel as the site for the reunion of kindred spirits. With the exception of drinking in pubs, none of the public spaces included in *Ulysses* are used by its characters according to their original function. Political spaces are conspicuous by their absence, and it is telling that the most significant reference to the judiciary in the novel (in ‘Lestrygonians’), is set in the context of the cruel prank played upon the paranoid Mr. Breen.
Both London and Dublin, as limited geographical entities, are extensively inventoried in *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Ulysses*. Joyce prided himself in the fact that *Ulysses*, should the occasion arise, could be used as a blueprint for the reconstruction of Dublin. In Defoe’s retrospective narrative there are references to the big fire, witnessed by him as a young child, that was to change the face of London the year following the plague. In this sense, the city, which can be documented in maps and directories, becomes the overarching body of evidence in both books. A body that, as Hugh Kenner points out, “once had walls and still has limits, which is laid out into streets and blocks, districts and zones” (Kenner, 1962, p. 55), a changing and unstable space that is constantly being surveyed and catalogued, just as the readers of these two books can verify H. F.’s and Bloom’s itineraries through London and Dublin with the aid of a map. Thus it is not difficult to imagine Joyce, and indeed Defoe, as Budgen put it, “at work with compass and slide-rule, a surveyor with theodolite and measuring chain” (Budgen, 1972, p. 123).

It is telling that Bloom’s thoughts often stray towards practical improvements of the city’s infrastructure, as when in conversation with fellow mourners in ‘Hades’ he suggests the establishment of a tramline to improve the transportation of cattle, as well as a Dublin replica of Milan’s funeral tram services (Joyce, 1992, pp. 122-3). H. F.’s practical mind has carefully weighted the effects of the plague on London’s commercial trade, and in this he echoes Defoe’s reforming character, frequently engaged in the design of social and political improvements. In the light of the advent of free trade and the industrial revolution, we have come to relate this type of practical and material preoccupation with bourgeois values. At the time of the publication of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, however, Britain was far from being the fully industrialised free trading empire that we associate with Dickens’s narratives, whilst turn of the century Ireland was by and large a rural society whose commercial interests were subordinated to those of its powerful neighbour. Thus, H. F.’s and Bloom’s engagement with the material world has to be understood as a reflection of their anxiety to secure it. Their practical concerns are those of a proto-bourgeoisie, uncertain as they are of the make-up of their social and economic milieu.

In the light of the above we can view H. F.’s desire to reconcile his material interests with a sense of divine intervention as an excuse for not fleeing the epidemic, as a manifestation of the early eighteenth-century process of capitalist secularisation. In this sense McKeon argues that:

> the celebrated “plain speaking” of Puritan “mechanick preaching” [...] consisted not in any paucity of figures but in a richness of reference to the plain things of this world whose very proximity seemed to facilitate a spiritual pedagogy (McKeon, 1991, p. 76).

Thus the instability in the narration of *A Journal of the Plague Year* can also be understood in terms of the shifting boundaries between material and spiritual truths. In
this respect, Bloom, whose love for the technical and material side of life goes largely unshared by others, would seem to be ahead of the rest of the characters in *Ulysses* precisely as a result of this engagement with the material world and the possibilities open for its improvement. It is because he already has an uncomplicated sense of community, violently misunderstood by the Citizen in ‘Cyclops’, that he can take the leap from the paralysing ideals of nationhood sponsored by his adversaries to a practical conception of society.

*Ulysses* begins by stating the desires of two young men to provide Ireland with a renewed source of spirituality, devotes most of its pages to narrate the seemingly banal adventures of its pragmatic protagonist, and finishes with the anticlimactic reunion of the spiritually minded Stephen and the materially concerned Bloom. *A Journal of the Plague Year* opens with the announcement of an imminent crisis, explores the effects of such a crisis in detail, to close at the point of heralding a return to normality, thus perhaps expressing its author’s anxiety both to solve and present the problems raised by his narrative. In the process of representation of the instability of their respective societies, Joyce and Defoe have signalled the transitory nature of all documents; a transition that is brilliantly reflected in Joyce’s parody of Defoe’s style, as well as his own, in ‘Oxen of the Sun’. In the end the manic inventory performed by their narrators has the ironic effect of exposing the impossibility of completely fixing the uncertainties that lurk behind these novels. Defoe had started by trying to itemise those elements that were to be put together with sobering control by later practitioners of the novel, while two hundred years later Joyce followed in his steps by dismantling their efforts with baffling precision.

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**PRIMARY SOURCES**

**SECONDARY SOURCES**


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i Anthony Burgess describes A Journal… as “rapid, colloquial, sometimes clumsy” (Burgess, 1986, p. 6).

ii In The Common Reader Woolf writes: “The great fame of [Robinson Crusoe] has done its author some injustice; for it has obscured the fact that he was a writer of other works which, it is safe to assert, were not read aloud to us as children” (Woolf, 1929, p. 122).

iii As Hammond states: “Defoe did not correspond to the respectable image of an eighteenth-century man of letters. He was not a gentleman; his background was not in literature, but in trade. True, he had had considerable writing experience, but this was in popular journalism rather than polite letters. In this sense he was the antithesis of Pope and Swift and was regarded by them with suspicion and disapproval” (Hammond, 1993, p. 14.)

iv “I want”, said Joyce, “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (Budgen, 1972, p. 69).

v Defoe wrote in The Review: “I remember very well what I saw with a sad heart, though I was but young; I mean the Fire of London” (Hammond, 1993, p. 5).

vi In The Novel and Society, Diana Spearman makes a very persuasive argument as to this fact.
Much of the detail in Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year is derived from historical sources, but the focus of the book is on the internal conflicts of the narrator. This focus is achieved by several means: (1) H.F. structures his account around his repentance of the decision to remain in London; (2) he frequently comments on his not entirely successful attempts to comprehend the nature of morality in a time of plague; (3) he uses many biblical references to suggest spiritual interpretations of physical reality. This focus on the narrator makes A Journal of the Plague Year something more like a novel than like either history or the seventeenth-century pious writings that lie in its background. Do you want to read the rest of this article? Request full-text. Citations (5). References (0).