

Intertextuality and the Role of the Eyewitness in Plague Descriptions

Giovanni Boccaccio, Daniel Defoe, and Albert Camus

Franziska Meier

Besides wars, natural disasters and famines, epidemics figure most prominently among the disasters that occasionally strike humankind and have therefore become an integral part of our apocalyptic visions. As far as the literary representation of these disasters is concerned, it is hardly surprising that, much more than epidemics or famines war holds an enduring interest for authors whether they describe it in a celebratory or a highly critical way. To some extent, this is due to the simple fact that epidemics do not occur as often as military battles. Moreover, there are special challenges that their description posed to writers throughout the ages. For instance, pandemic situations do not offer many opportunities to praise outstanding heroic individual or group performances – a convention of narrative genres in ancient times; diseases rather seem to beset cities and countries suddenly, striking in an uncontrollable as well as, for a long time, incomprehensible way. It was not until the end of the 19th century that they could finally be somewhat mitigated and contained. Beyond that, epidemic outbreaks attacked and annihilated what is considered to be essential to humankind, in particular the notion of the individual's dignity, the evidence of natural bounds between kins and friends, and the most elementary achievements of civilization: the basic social order and the burial rites an individual was entitled to enjoy.

Beyond the lethal threat, once an epidemic had gained momentum, those who survived and, in the aftermath, took to writing about the events had to face several issues. First, which genre should they select? Epidemics could hardly fit into the traditional narrative genres that usually plotted the adventures of individuals or groups of more or less heroic characters. Unsurprisingly, in the ancient and medieval era, authors fell back on the chronicle style. It took a very long time until epidemics and their outcomes would appear in fictional or novelistic writing.¹ This long-lasting un-

1 This is a question that in my view still awaits to be explored. In a very cautious manner, I would state that whereas Defoe's *Journal of Plague* and Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi* are rightly qualified as "boundary-texts," for different reasons though, Albert Camus is likely to be one of the first

certainly about the adequate genre contributed to the formation of a tradition of its own, a legacy of Western plague writing that stretches from Thucydides' famous depiction in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* to his much later heir, Giovanni Boccaccio, as well as to their modern successors Daniel Defoe, Alessandro Manzoni, and Albert Camus not to name but the most important who figure among the top ten on Western reading lists during the first year of COVID-19. This legacy can be immediately grasped in the high degree of intertextuality that becomes visible in these otherwise very different depictions.²

Secondly, how could writers give structure and coherence to what, by its very nature, defied any order? Should they transmit the spreading of the disease to readers from the limited perspective of an individual or rather from the perspective of a detached observer?

Scholars have already acknowledged the use of a first-person narrator or eye-witness in plague depiction, mostly however, without giving further attention to it. The only exception is Jennifer Cooke's book *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, according to which the first-person narrator is "clearly a fictional device" (Healy, 25–44; Cooke, 31) – an insight she drew from her readings of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year* and, to a lesser extent, from Albert Camus's novel *La Peste*. The device allowed literature to step into the gap that divided the "official account" of history and the personal points of view on what had happened (Cooke, 42). However, even a superficial look at the two major depictions written long before Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year* makes us aware of the fact that the figure of an eye-witness can also serve other purposes and is not simply a fictional device to bridge the gap between official historiography and personal histories. Thucydides, for instance, includes a non-fictional eye-witness-passage in his depiction. Therefore, despite many obvious differences between the five major plague narratives discussed here, a comparison may well provide deeper insights into how writers dealt with the issue of being a witness in and of an epidemic.

who achieved a novel about a fictitious epidemic. I presume that the modern dystopian novels, probably starting with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, lent themselves best to incorporate a plague within a fictional text.

- 2 The fact that plague depictions highly depend on their predecessors has already been acknowledged; cf. David Steel. 1981. *Plague Writing: From Boccaccio to Camus*. *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 11, 88–110. Jennifer Cooke's monograph *Legacies of Plague* offers a very extreme take on this phenomenon: "There is a logic of contamination at work between plague and the narratives that tell of it. For instance, the role of the parasitic flea in plague outbreaks has as its textual corollary a tendency among plague writers to parasitise (sic!) one another," Jennifer Cook. 2019. *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, Palgrave Macmillan, 18.

Thucydides and the Body of the Historian

The Greek historian Thucydides includes the description of a plague in Athens in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, although, as he tells his readers, this horrible event was not really part of this long war. The historian decided to place a summary of the three-year-long plague in the second chapter of the second book, at the moment of its outbreak. More precisely, he positioned his account at a significant point in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, between the brilliant funeral speech in which Pericles praised the greatness of the Athenian polis in the previous chapter and the death of the same statesman that is mentioned shortly after the plague description.³

The admiration which Thucydides's depiction enjoys, conveys an idea of how skillfully the extremely chaotic sequences of the epidemic are brought into a perfectly ordered and highly balanced picture. In the voice of a detached historian, the depiction starts with some chronological and geographical details about the disease's origins and its arrival in Attica. It then focuses on the symptoms and the progression of the disease and, subsequently, to its disastrous impact on social order, laws, and on the achievements of human civilization. Thucydides carefully highlights the extent to which the doctors as well as the city's government had been overpowered by the sudden outbreak of an entirely unknown disease and therefore did not know how to prevent the total breakdown of order and customs.

At the beginning of the *History*, the author had already identified himself as a contemporary of the Peloponnesian war who had immediately assessed its importance. Consequentially, there would be no need to repeat it in this chapter. Interestingly, he nevertheless mentions his personal involvement – in a rather cursory manner – within the highly elaborated, well-structured description of the epidemic's many disturbing aspects and effects on the population. In the second paragraph, he says:

All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again. This I can the better do, as I had the disease myself, and watched its operation in the case of others. (Thucydides)⁴

3 According to Karl Reinhardt, by placing the plague between the two scenes Thucydides may have made a tacit critical comment on Pericles' funeral speech. "Thukydides und Machiavelli," Karl Reinhardt. 1966. *Vermächtnis der Antike. Gesammelte Essays zur Philosophie und Geschichtsschreibung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 184–218.

4 The English translation by Richard Crawley can be found on <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm#link2HCH0007>.

In this passage, the first-person singular first refers to the self-understanding of a historian whose principle is not to yield to speculations that cannot be proven by rational arguments. Instead, he claims to stick only to what had actually happened, which in this context means the symptoms of the disease. His aim is not to understand why the disaster had struck the city, but to collect and record as many details of the novel medical signs as possible since nobody had ever heard of them beforehand. His ambition is to alert future generations so that they may be better prepared to fight a similar outbreak. It is only in the last sentence of the passage that the historian turns to his being an eyewitness, or more precisely, a lucky survivor who can testify about the atrocities. Here, the historian who is proudly displaying his objectivity and inner detachment brings into play his body. The emphasis is not so much put on his point of view as on his physical body that suffered from and witnessed the infection and thereby proved the pertinence of the indications. In other words: it is the memory of the sick body which gives major credibility to the account.

Although the historian does not give information about his own recovery from the plague, it is interesting to read what he later states about a behavior specific to all those who were lucky to survive.⁵ After having depicted the dehumanizing effects of the plague on the citizens, Thucydides adds:

Yet it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience, and had now no fear for themselves; for the same man was never attacked twice – never at least fatally. And such persons not only received the congratulations of others, but themselves also, in the elation of the moment, half entertained the vain hope that they were for the future safe from any disease whatsoever. (Thucydides)

Apparently, those who recovered from the infection had not been oppressed by the trauma of having survived. On the contrary, they stood out among their compatriots for their enhanced moral fortitude in the face of the plague's dehumanizing effect. I'm wondering whether this remark can also be referred to the historian in general, or, specifically, to the way in which he depicts the plague. Since we do not have other contemporary sources, it is impossible to say if his account proves to be more lenient in relation to the saddest and most horrible effects of the plague. It is obvious that Thucydides shies away from criticizing the doctors or the government for any shortcomings in their response to the plague. The only benefit that can be drawn from the survival seems to consist in processing what had happened and in giving to future generations the most accurate account of it.

5 Interestingly, this second hint is not taken into account by recent researchers, such as Elena Gome. 2000. "The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 4, 405–433 (in particular 410).

It is yet intriguing that Thucydides assigns a state of hubris to those who survived. Of course, it mainly pertains to their confidence in being immune to any disease or, to be blunt, in being granted a longer life. Amid countless dead, they felt almost like being immortal and, thereby, somehow detached from the earthly world. It is noteworthy that Thucydides inserted these two hints regarding his personal and subjective experience with the disease in a depiction that is otherwise marked by its objectivity and detachment. On a literal level, the figure of the witness is deployed to authenticate the specifically medical aspects of the depiction of the disease. On a metaliterary level, it may have exempted the author from the dehumanizing effect of the plague and, thereby, conferred authority onto him.

Giovanni Boccaccio or Eye-witnessing the Marvelous

Like Thucydides, Boccaccio incorporates his description of the Black Death that had struck the city of Florence in 1348 and wiped out more than half of the population, into a much longer text. His chronicle of the outbreak that opens the *Decameron* had been promptly admired as a rhetorical and stylistic masterpiece that soon circulated on its own. In the vernacular, Boccaccio had achieved an elegant prose style modeled on the sophisticated Latin syntax which could compete with the best ancient prose writings. He took inspiration from a Latin model, the *Historia Langobardorum* in which Paulus Diaconus, treading in the footsteps of Thucydides, depicted the Justinian plague that had devastated the countryside of Milan in the 6th century. Ironically, the more Boccaccio adapted his medieval model to the reality of the Black Death in the city of Florence, the closer he came to the Greek antecedent to which he did not have access.

Following this ancient model, Boccaccio gives an astoundingly balanced and thematically well-ordered account of the chaotic confusion brought upon Florence by the Black Death. His representation of the epidemic stretches from initial chronological and geographical considerations to the symptoms and progression of the disease and, finally, to the social and political breakdown of the city that fell into anarchy once the prevailing natural, moral, and social bonds completely deteriorated. Like Thucydides, Boccaccio takes on the role of a detached chronicler who retrospectively draws an insightful picture of the frightful months. Contrary to Thucydides, however, he does not bother to point out that he is a citizen of Florence, and, therefore, a contemporary of the plague. It is hard to tell whether this omission is due to the convention of medieval literature or to the personal circumstances in the author's life about which we don't know much or if his presence was simply taken for granted.

Boccaccio only briefly adopts a first-person perspective. Contrary to Thucydides, he does not mention that he survived the disease, nor that he had lost friends and

members of his family. As a result, this first-person perspective is comparatively impersonal. He places the passage at a significant juncture in the well-planned description, that is at the very end of the medical report and immediately before the chronicler turns to the epidemic's horrendous impact on the social and anthropological order. More precisely, the first-person perspective occurs when the incredibly high risk of infection is addressed. Like Thucydides, Boccaccio switches from the I of the detached author to the subjective I of a witness. He accurately introduces and emphasizes the reason why he had to revert to his personal testimony:

So marvelous sounds that which I have now to relate, that, had not many, and I among them, observed it with their own eyes, I had hardly dared to credit it, much less to set it down in writing, though I had had it from the lips of a credible witness. (Boccaccio O.17-O.18)⁶

The first-person perspective is employed to give credibility to something “miracoloso” that contradicts the common rules of reality. Strikingly, the chronicler is not the only witness to what happened. He stresses that he would not have dared to write down the scene if he had not seen it himself. He does not so much insist on his personal involvement and intimate exposure to the historical event of the Black Death, he rather highlights that he is about to recount something unlikely to be believed. This insistence is astonishing in the context of a chronicle, it is much more familiar in poetry. It regularly occurs when poets are forced to break a rule established by Horace in his *Ars poetica* according to which poetry should always stick to what is probable.

Apart from being a rhetorical device employed in poetry, the figure of an eyewitness may also relate to a more recent use of this testimonial mode that had gained momentum during the 13th century. Boccaccio, who was trained in canon law, was aware of the essential role that the eyewitness had begun to play in lawsuits as well as in procedures of canonization. Whenever a dead contemporary who had been already venerated as a saint was proposed to be canonized, the committee asked for proof of a miracle. The evidence, in turn, requested an eyewitness.⁷ Boccaccio may have been inspired by this juridical procedure when he refers to his having been an eyewitness to a marvelous event that heavily contested the well-established hierarchical divisions of God's creation. He may even have had in mind to parody the procedure, as is often the case in the novellas of the *Decameron*.

6 Translation by J. M. Rigg. https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=do1intro&lang=eng.

7 Cf. Roberto Righi. 2019. *Mediante specie: note a Francesco stimmatizzato*, 71–87; Franziska Meier. *Poesia e diritto nel Due – e Trecento italiano*, Longo.

Boccaccio's direct testimony concerns a scene that at first sight is only supposed to give an idea of how infectious the plague had been:

I say, then, that such was the energy of the contagion of the said pestilence, that it was not merely propagated from man to man, but, what is much more startling, it was frequently observed, that things which had belonged to one sick or dead of the disease, if touched by some other living creature, not of the human species, were the occasion, not merely of sickening, but of an almost instantaneous death. Whereof my own eyes (as I said a little before) had cognizance, one day among others, by the following experience. The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being strewn about the open street, two hogs came thither, and after, as is their wont, no little trifling with their snouts, took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro about their chaps; whereupon, almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags which in an evil hour they had disturbed. (Boccaccio O.18)

The epidemic questions the clear-cut distinction between animals and human beings. In Boccaccio's Christian humanistic worldview, the human species is considered to be superior to animals. The Black Death, however, challenges this view. Contrary to the context of religious canon law in which the eyewitness serves to prove that someone had risen beyond the limits imposed on human beings, Boccaccio employs it to debunk the supposedly self-evident superiority of humankind – incidentally, this procedure is consistent with the satirical and parodistic style in some novellas. From here, it does not come as a surprise that Boccaccio placed the passage just before addressing the deterioration of the social and moral order. While Thucydides referred to his first hand-knowledge in a medical context, Boccaccio deploys the first-person perspective in a medical context as well, but at the very point of the text where the topic of the medical peculiarities yields to the epidemic's anguishing impact on civilization. The brief eye-witness passage, therefore, serves as an eye-opener to what remains at the core of Boccaccio's plague description, i.e., the very questioning of the widespread belief in human achievements and superiority. The scene of the sudden infection followed by the death of two hogs brings a more general anthropological dimension to the fore: the abyss of human behavior, the bestiality inherent to mankind⁸ – an aspect that will be reflected in manifold ways by the ten young people who escape from the plagued Florence to build a harmonious alternative world.

8 According to David Steel, in the *Decameron* "the age of modern fiction was ushered in by a virus" because the plague directly caused the gathering of the young people. Seemingly, Steel does not acknowledge how neatly Boccaccio separates the historical part from what is called "novella portante," the story of the ten young people fleeing from Florence. Nonetheless, Steel's assessment was resumed by Jennifer Cooper, op. cit. on p. 17.

The First Eye-Witness Narration: Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*

Daniel Defoe's depiction of the "Great Visitation" of the plague in London differs from the two predecessors in many ways. The author was only five years old when the plague came to London in 1665. What is more, he did not only dedicate an entire book to the topic but described the spread of the epidemic from the perspective of an eyewitness. Interestingly, the literary depiction in *Journal of a Plague Year* published in March 1722 had been preceded and accompanied by a prolific journalistic activity starting in 1709.⁹ In fact, as a journalist and novelist, Defoe had been obsessed with the idea that another plague might spread from the continent to the island.¹⁰ Around 1720, at the time when a plague broke out in Marseille, the journalist Defoe seemed to have supported the preventive measures taken by the Walpole government.¹¹ Two years later, when the plague had reached the English shores, he published the pamphlet *Due Preparations for the Plague, as well for Soul as Body*, a kind of guidebook on survival techniques. Roughly a month later, the *Journal* came out, in which the novelist tried to take advantage of the current anguish.¹²

A Journal of the Plague Year is the first literary "plague text" of the Western canon written in a first-person perspective. However, the subjective point of view as well as the stance of the self as a witness is far from being firmly established. This is already reflected in the graphical arrangement of the front page of the first edition. Contrary to *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders*, it is not the name of the first-person narrator but the plague that is put center stage. This may be due to the marketing of a book that responded to and played with the fears of contemporaries who were anxious to get information about how to protect themselves. Incidentally, even the historical dating of the plague – the "Great Visitation" took place fifty years ago – is printed in smaller letters. Finally, it is only in the lower half of the front page and in still smaller letters separated by two lines that the author of the *Journal* is mentioned. According

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- 9 It would be interesting to know more about the reason why in the centuries after the *Decameron*, poets seem to have almost lost interest in the description of plagues. The many plagues that continued to devastate Europe, instead, left their mark on written documents such as chronicles or ego-documents and on scientific, most of all medical treatises. In Defoe, the two lines merge again.
 - 10 Cf. David Roberts's introduction to Daniel Defoe. 2010. "*A Journal of the Plague Year*," Oxford UP, x.
 - 11 Patrick Reilly. 2015. *Bills of mortality. Disease and Destiny in Plague Literature from Early Modern to Postmodern Times*, Peter Lang.
 - 12 The editor of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Louis Landa, recommends that readers "do better to consider the *Journal* not as an isolated work: it is, in fact, the culmination of a persistent interest in plague expressed in Defoe's writing for at least a decade before he wrote the *Journal*. The very idea of plague seems to have been an abiding fact in his consciousness." Quoted by Cooke, 25.

to the front page, the account is “written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London” and has never been published before. Thus, the only aspects that seem to matter are that the author is a Londoner and an eyewitness.

The citizen does not have a name nor is there any hint at his editor, Daniel Defoe. It will be only at the very end of the account that the reader learns the initials of the narrator. As scholars already pointed out, H.F. matches those of Defoe’s uncle, Henry Foe. Be that as it may, Defoe does not seem to be interested in a more individualistic self-portrait of the narrator. The use of initials may simply be due to a juridical convention according to which the account of a witness had to be signed and, thereby, authenticated.

The omission of the name indicates a revealing uneasiness about the first-person perspective that pervades the entire account. Admittedly, the narrator speaks about his whereabouts, his family, his profession, and his living in London during the plague, but his account does not reach a level of completeness as to how an individual may intellectually, practically, and emotionally have coped with the plague. It has already been pointed out that the account starts with an “I” in the first sentence and, famously, ends with an “I” in the fourth line of the concluding stanza: “Yet I alive.”¹³ However, from the very first sentence the “I” is eager to be part of a collective experience and to identify with others. In fact, the account is not limited to his first-hand experiences. The self rather transforms itself into a representative of his fellow citizen who collected numerous second-hand experiences. By doing so, his account meshes a polyphony of small stories and anecdotes which H.F. had observed or heard about. Moreover, the multitude of second-hand experiences does not show different or contrasting individual points of view against which the writer sets his own. In case he takes sides between diverging opinions, he significantly prefers a standpoint that holds the golden middle.¹⁴ His purpose rather is to filter or, better, to generalize them. He deals with the others’ experiences as if they were *exempla*: “cases” (Defoe 2010, 50) in the ancient and medieval sense of the term.

Although the *Journal* is written in a first-person perspective, the narrator does not conceive of his account as “a History of my actings,” but as a “Direction” “to act by” (Defoe 2010, 9). From the start, however, his acting is far from being sensible or an example to be followed. Whereas his brother, for instance, brings forward many rational arguments in favor of leaving the city, the self yields to what he calls signs

13 Jennifer Cooper, for instance, insisted on this continuous presence, 38–39.

14 Telling in this regard is the first paragraph. The opening sentence introduces the first-person pronoun; the I, however, immediately adheres to a group of neighbors who face diverging opinions and rumors. Eventually, the narrator settles on the “all-agreed” consensual assessment of the last “transmitter” that matters only.

“from Heaven” (Defoe 2010, 10).¹⁵ Even though the narrator interprets a series of hazards, such as a sudden illness, as heavenly signs, he does not go on to understand all his following actions or his writing as stemming from a religious calling. On the contrary, he tries to fashion himself as a craftsman who applies the rules of reason and common sense.¹⁶

A similar uneasiness can be sensed when the narrator justifies his walking across the city, the foundation on which the account is built. He admits that he transgressed the very measures that had been taken to prevent the spreading of the plague. Moreover, he acknowledges that the search for news and particularities was none of his business. However, he could not help that “my Curiosity led, or rather drove me to go and see this Pit again” (Defoe 2010, 53). He does not condemn his curiosity, but neither does he feel entitled to observe or collect all the information and experiences regarding the plague; nor does he think to have the right to evaluate the success of the government’s many policies, though he does so throughout the book. In short, in the *Journal* the role of the self in the plague and in its representation is far from being self-evident. It is aware of violating a taboo.

The witness seems to have struggled also with staying at home, with isolating in accordance with the severe quarantine rules imposed by the government and praised by the journalist Defoe. Interestingly, it is during these days in which he had to stay in place that he took to writing to fill the void:

Terrified by those frightful Objects, I would retire Home sometimes, and resolve to go out no more; [...] Such intervals as I had, I employed in reading Books and in writing down my Memorandums of what occurred to me every Day, and out of which, afterwards, I [took] most of this Work as it relates to my Observations without Doors. What I wrote of my private Meditations I reserve for private Use, and desire it may not be made publick on any Account whatever. (Defoe 2010, 67)

It seems that every time he observes the imposed quarantine, he felt compelled to write. Among his several notebooks, he mentions a “Memorandum” that contains a kind of day-to-day writing log. The account we read, however, is not a simple copy of this diary. It is based on a rigid selection and redrafting of selected passages by the first-person narrator. Only the passages which deal with what was happening outside of his home were included in the draft. It is hard to say what he means by “private Meditations,” for the account itself does contain judgments and musings

15 Following a chance reading of the “91st Psalm” (13), in particular, a verse that promises God’s protection and shelter, he decides to stay. According to Patrick Reilly, H.F. follows a “puritan practice of *sortes Biblicae*,” 29.

16 Cf. Patrick Reilly, according to whom the narrator prefers “the measure of reason and the voice of sanity,” 31.

on what he saw or heard. Anyhow, the first-person account is preceded by an intentional omission of anything private. Moreover, the selected diary entries are clearly remodeled by a first-person narrator in the aftermath of the plague. This can be deduced from his hinting at the first and second part of the plague year which implies that he narrated the entire development of the epidemic from hindsight, or from his comment that the same emotions welled up in him again while writing. (Defoe 2010, 16, 49) Thus, on the one hand, the narrator is eager to emphasize that many highly emotional aspects of the plague are still present in his mind and, consequentially, in his writings, and, on the other hand, that he takes control of what he had lived on the spot in a probably very confusing way.

This thematic order in which the narrator organizes the sequence of the plague and its representation, strongly marks the account. Although the title of the book promises a “journal” – a term that in the Eighteenth century meant both “[a] diary; an account kept of daily transactions” and “any paper published daily” (*Johnson’s Dictionary*) –, the book is neither a personal diary nor a newspaper. It is not even arranged along a chronological structure since the timeline is not put into evidence. Although the inserted weekly statistics or orders do suggest a chronology, it becomes clear on closer inspection that the narrator implements a structure that is largely based on thematic headings under which he unrolls over many pages his observations and experiences. He pieces together those which refer to the symptoms of the disease, those that feature the measures taken by the government adding to them the people’s various reactions, including his observations about the range of behaviors of the afflicted as well as the not-yet infected Londoners. He completes his account with descriptions of the mass burials. The weekly statistics are placed when the author addresses the speedy spreading of the plague or the astronomically high number of buried dead. In contrast with the title “journal of a plague year”¹⁷, the writer transfers the traumatizing months into a tableau of themes, of specific aspects respectively illustrated by individual cases. It is possible that it was this attempt to bring order into the confusing memories of the plague that undermined a full-blown articulation of the first-person narrative.

It is remarkable that the retrospective account does not stage the interplay between the former witnessing and the later writing self. The first-person is the agent who moves within the epidemic situation, but not the protagonist who confesses and tries to process the many traumatizing experiences that marked him. He does not mention how he integrated them into his biography. In his view, the first- as well as second-hand experiences seem to be valuable only inasmuch as they may improve governmental policies against the plague and, thereby, enhance the welfare of the community. The narrator cannot connect his personal experiences to a religious or

17 In his introduction, David Roberts calls the *Journal* a “boundary text” (XVI) and then a historical novel (XIX).

moral framework even though the idea intermittently emerges. In fact, the narrator does not conceal his utter disappointment that the plague – sometimes qualified as a divine punishment – had not morally improved the Londoners (cf. Defoe 2010, 212). In hindsight, the plague seems to have only caused senseless suffering.

It seems to have been this profound disillusion that compelled the narrator to conclude his account of the *Plague Year*:

I can go no farther here, I should be counted censorious, and perhaps unjust, if I should enter into the unpleasant Work of reflecting, whatever Cause there was for it, upon the Unthankfulness and Return of all manner of Wickedness among us, which I was so much an Eye-Witness of myself; I shall conclude the Account of this calamitous Year therefore...

A dreadful Plague in London was,
In the Year Sixty-Five
Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls
Away; yet I alive! (Defoe 2010, 212)

Interestingly, the prose writing ends in a poetic stanza that has been read as “an assertion of its miraculous survival” (Roberts in Defoe 2010, XXII). The fact of surviving amid the Great Visitation in 1665 may be considered as a small triumph over the Plague. On closer inspection, however, this self-assertion becomes questionable. The four lines mirror the very essence of the plague depiction: three-and-a-quarter lines cover the plague that devastated large parts of a city whereas only two-thirds of the last line are dedicated to the self who has the last word: the first word “away” conveys both the tremendous menace from which the lonely I escaped as well as its fierce resistance to it. Yet, it is hard to tell whether the last outcry shows the self-confidence of an individual who by chance defied the plague’s threats or just stresses the abyss between the many dead and the few surviving bodies.¹⁸ Intriguingly, the narrator’s survival is already undermined by the editor who in a *Nota Bene* had informed the reader about the witness’ burial place.¹⁹ Thus, the benefit of having escaped an anonymous, collective death-by-plague seems only to have been a death marked by proper ritual and handling of the body.

18 Cf. Patrick Reilly, 39: “The contagion operates so efficaciously, however, that London’s deliverance from the plague, as H.F. avers in the final pages of his journal, indeed rests upon a divine miracle.” This is certainly true, but at the same time, the eventual disappointment does not leave any doubt about the fact that the many sufferings and victims had been “senseless.”

19 “N.B. The Author of this Journal, lyes buried on that very Ground, being at his own Desire, his sister having been buried here a few Years before,” 199.

Alessandro Manzoni or the Unreliability of the Eyewitness

In 1821, the Italian novelist and historian Alessandro Manzoni, inspired by the success of Walter Scott, started working on a historical novel in which the plague that devastated Milan in 1629–30 plays a pivotal role. His depiction differs from that of his three predecessors in many ways. For the first time, the plague is an integral part of a novel; the author, however, stresses the difference between the two chapters dedicated to the event and the fictional part. Moreover, Manzoni's narrator writes from a historical distance of two hundred years. Therefore, the inner detachment of the historian does not originate in an act of self-distancing nor can the narrator of the *Promessi Sposi* bring into play his first-hand knowledge. Interestingly, the issue of the eyewitness arises nonetheless.

Manzoni was initially disappointed with the first version of the novel *Fermo e Lucia* which circulated exclusively among his friends in 1823. The main critique seems to have been that he had not given a balanced representation of the many characters in the fictional plot and that the novel was overcrowded with historical digressions of varying lengths. In the new version which Manzoni drafted between 1824 and 1827, he revised the representation of the characters as well as the historical digressions. For instance, he moved the long description of the process of the “unguenti” (Anointments) to an appendix: *La Storia della Colonna Infame*. This second version of the novel, published under the title *I Promessi Sposi* in 1827, is not a purely historical novel. At the outbreak of the plague, Manzoni switches from the historical-fictional plot to a historiographical discourse. In this sense, his novel is also a boundary-text as far as its adherence to genre rules is concerned. In contrast with the tradition established by the Scottish novelist, Manzoni makes his narrator explicitly step out of the ongoing storytelling in the chapters 31 and 32 and slip into the role of a historian who offers an archival reconstruction of the plague.²⁰

Apart from the appendix to which the historical reconstruction in the novel explicitly refers its readers, it is in these two chapters that the value of personal testimony is questioned. According to the historian, the more he studied the chronicles as well as legal and administrative documents, the more he became aware of divergences and contradictions that eventually weakened his trust in eye-witness ac-

20 The plague does have an impact on the fictional characters too. According to Reilly, “[t]he aesthetics and the ethic in *The Betrothed*, then – i.e. Fra Cristoforo’s (as well as the narrator’s and Manzoni’s) construct of destiny and the moral paradigm that informs it – do more perhaps to justify God’s way to man than they do to illuminate the cause and nature of the plague or to mitigate the progress of its effects....Its [the plague’s; fm] terror spreads unreined [sic!], and the human imagination seeks to explain aesthetically what it cannot comprehend intellectually: God. The plague may fell the blessed beside the damned, but by the sovereign God’s grace the good shall be redeemed in heavenly embrace while the evil shall perish in hell. God selects, the plague is” (69–70).

counts. Whereas Defoe's first-person narrator happily engaged with a polyphony of testimonies, Manzoni's historian is puzzled by the conflicting and confusing picture that results from a comparative reading of the contemporaneous reports.²¹ He does not reject one single testimony as unreliable, he rather concludes that witnesses' accounts do not coalesce into "history," he understands as a chain connecting causes to their effects. In other words, it is only from a historical distance that the records of contemporaries – however detached the voice of the author may sound and however controlled the composition is – can be pieced together in order to amount to what Manzoni calls "la storia della peste."

Whereas Boccaccio pointed at bestiality as a fundamental challenge to all human beings, Manzoni's depiction focuses on both, outstanding examples of human dedication as well as human failures. The issue of the eyewitness emerges within the reflection about the extent to which the people, most of all the governors and administrators, were to be held accountable for the plague's devastations. Manzoni, therefore, shifts the focus to the foolish reactions, to the voluntary blindness of contemporaries who prefer to deny reality – by not calling the plague by its name, and thereby contributing to its spreading. In particular, he pinpoints that even doctors and educated people who ought to have known better, fell victim to current irrational moods. In the novel, the historian alludes only briefly to the episode of the "unguenti" who had been suspected to infect the city with deadly poison and to the "terribile delirio" (Manzoni 1984, 539). He outlines that even skeptical contemporaries could not help believing in something highly unlikely (Manzoni 1984, 560). In contrast to Boccaccio, who used the device of an eyewitness to give credibility to something marvelous, Manzoni, as a historian, diagnosed – based on eye-witness reports – how easily contemporaries are entrapped by irrationality.

In the appendix dedicated to the trial against the "unguenti," he wants to prove that the high medical infection rate had been accompanied by an equally intense and perilous mental contamination. Whereas Piero Verri's reading of the case files pushed him into accusing the juridical use of torture as abuse, Manzoni came to the conclusion that even the judges had been affected by mental delirium. Significantly, he starts with the testimonies of three eyewitnesses who allegedly observed a man smearing a wall. He switches from the indirect to the eye-witness' direct speech in which the verbs "vedere" or "dare nell'occhio" occur three times.²² He illustrates that

21 Cf. Alessandro Manzoni. 1984. *I promessi sposi. Storia milanese del secolo XVII scoperta e rifatta*, Mondadori, 525f: "Delle molte relazioni contemporanee, non ce n'è alcuna che basti da sé a darne un'idea un po' distinta e ordinata; [...] In ognuna di queste relazioni [...] sono omissi fatti essenziali [...] ci sono errori materiali [...] In tutte poi regna una strana confusione di tempi e di cose; è un continuo andare e venire, come alla ventura, senza disegno generale, senza disegno nei particolari."

22 "Vide venire un uomo con una cappa nera, e il cappello sugli occhi, e una carta in mano, sopra la quale, dice costei nella sua deposizione, metteua su le mani, che pareua che scriuesse. Le diede

it does not require a very accurate reading of the testimonies to realize the extent to which the visual perception was marked by the current fear of anointers and that even the judges did not pay attention to the many inconsistencies. While Boccaccio's use of the eyewitness playfully alludes to the rise of a juridical means, Manzoni – consistent with his general critical reading of the ego-documents from the Milan plague – criticizes the practice by highlighting the ambiguity of first-person testimonials. Whereas he casts general doubts on first-person plague accounts in the novel, it is in the appendix that he contests the value of eye-witness testimonials. Like Boccaccio, Manzoni connects the reflection on the figure of an eyewitness to his main anthropological interest in plagues: the shortcomings of human perception and the looming menace of irrationality. In a nutshell, according to him, a contemporary is not able to detach himself from what is happening. Neither the personal testimonial nor the detached rendering of the plague offers a consistent and reliable narration of the epidemic.

Albert Camus or the Suspension of the First-Person Narrative

Similar to Alessandro Manzoni, the French author Albert Camus did not have any first-hand experience of a plague, even though in his homeland Algeria there were cases of contagious diseases. Instead, he learned from medical books and studied the ancient depictions. Unlike Manzoni, he did not take a historical interest in the plague. As far as we can tell from the surviving drafts of the first version, Camus did not plan to establish a first-person narrative. He rather wanted to give much space to the diary of a Greek and Latin teacher, Philippe Stephan, from which a narrator would have quoted large extracts. The extracts are filled with reflections upon a failed marriage and comments on the plague depictions of two ancient writers: Thucydides and Lucretius. The teacher seems to have been particularly interested in tracing the differences between a depiction by an eyewitness and a second-hand description. After the outbreak of a plague, the teacher would come to a better understanding of the two major plague tests.²³ Thus, in contrast with his first, highly acclaimed novel *L'Étranger* published in 1942, Camus did not pursue a rendering of the plague

*nell'occhio che, entrando nella strada, si fece appresso alla muraglia delle case, e che è subito dopo voltato il cantone, e che a luogo a luogo tirava con le mani dietro al muro. All'ora mi viene un pensiero, soggiunge, se a caso fosse un poco uno di quelli che, a' giorni passati, andavano onendo le muraglie, [...] et viddi, dice, che teneua toccato la detta muraglia con le mani." Alessandro Manzoni. 2020. *Storia della Colonna Infame*, Sellerio, 21.*

23 Cf. Paul Demont. 2009. « *Le Journal de Philippe Stephan dans la première version de La Peste d'Albert Camus. Note sur une édition récente* ». *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Année 109, no. 3, 710–724.

from an exclusively subjective point of view. He established a third-person narration interspersed with long quotations from a diary.

These early drafts did not leave any trace in the final version of the novel *La Peste* of 1947. The character of the teacher disappeared, and the two ancient depictions are only hinted at once. Whereas the first version seems to have focused on psychological issues accentuated by the plague, in the final version Camus eliminated the topic of love. The plague became an allegorical tool²⁴ to speak and reflect on the impact of the German occupation on the French population and on possible forms of reacting and resisting it. Parallel to his new philosophical orientation, Camus did not so much outline the absurdity of the world than, in harmony with his essay *L'homme révolté*, plead for taking action and saving lives.²⁵

La Peste starts as a chronicle about some events that took place in an unspecified year of the 1940s in Oran.²⁶ In the first paragraph, the chronicler does not even point to his being a citizen of the Algerian city. In the first chapter, the passive voice or, from the third paragraph on, the first-person plural prevails. Incidentally, contrary to Defoe's witness who is happy to join in with peers, in Camus' novel the first-person plural implies an imposed unity that, by the measures taken against the spreading of the plague, is separated from the rest of the world. Therefore, the pronoun "we" does not only express the suffering large group of those who feared falling victim to the plague, or already did, but most of all a community who is forced into exile. Whereas the witnesses of all the preceding plague writings were driven by the wish to convey their peculiar experience and knowledge to future generations, Camus' novel conveys an exceptional experience to those who live outside of Oran.

At the end of the first chapter, the narrator explicitly defines himself as a "chroniste" (Camus 1947, 13–14) because he limits his task to report what had happened during the epidemic, even if that what he must tell sounded contradictory and hard to believe. Intriguingly, the chronicler, in order to enhance his own credibility, places more confidence in the collective feeling of what is true than in relying on eye-witness testimonies: "il y a donc des milliers de témoins qui estimeront dans le cœur la vérité de ce qu'il dit" (Camus 1947, 14). In the following, the last paragraph of the first chapter, the chronicler calls himself a "narrateur" (Camus 1947, 14) who is not presented as an abstract entity or a merely literary voice, but as a character who lived in Oran during the plague. He justifies his narration by a series of coincidences that

24 This transformation is signaled in the novel's motto extracted from Defoe's *Serious Reflections*, the third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, as has been pointed out by Cooper, 27.

25 Interestingly the reception of Camus' novel changed during the COVID-19-pandemic. It got almost rid of its clear political – antifascist – message and started being appreciated as one of the best, if not the most authentic representation of how people live and react to an epidemic.

26 Albert Camus. 1947. *La peste*, Gallimard, 11: "Les curieux événements qui sont le sujet de cette chronique se sont produits en 194., à Oran."

placed him at the core of the events and made him a collector of the reports of other citizens as well as the chance inheritor of some diaries or notebooks. Significantly, he does not tell his name, nor does he insist on his having been an eyewitness. He includes his own apparently mostly hearsay-based knowledge among some other oral and written testimonies in his account of the plague. The first chapter ends up alluding to a first-person narrator who does not only embrace other testimonies but also tries to suppress any personal features. By postponing the revelation of his identity, he leaves his readers in suspense. Significantly, he will not even use the first-person pronoun after having revealed his identity.

In the fourth chapter, this artificial suspension of the narrator's identity takes on a perplexing, if not an alienating form when the unnamed narrator brings a conversation to a halt:

A ce point du récit qui laisse Bernard Rieux derrière sa fenêtre, on permettra au narrateur de justifier l'incertitude et la surprise du docteur, puisque, avec des nuances, sa réaction fut celle de la plupart de nos concitoyens. (Camus 1947, 41)

The narrator, who is the very doctor Rieux, transforms himself seemingly into a figure whose behavior at the first signs of the plague's outbreak he considers exemplary. Instead of retrospectively criticizing his own weakness and all-too-human impulse to ignore what was obvious, the narrator splits from his former self by placing it within a group that shows a broad range of similar behaviors. In other words, the narrator does not only transform himself into a quasi-alloof character but also into an "example." In this paragraph, the self-distancing seems to have entitled the narrator to be lenient with a form of blindness even if, to some degree, it had caused an important delay in taking measures to protect the population. Beyond that, it may be inferred from this voluntary objectification of the narrator that the horrible events cannot seamlessly be integrated into a personal biography. The plague causes a rupture that cannot be bridged.

At the beginning of the last chapter, the narrator presumes that it is time to reveal his own name. Although he continues to define the book as a chronicle, he explains why he had taken "*le ton d'un témoin objectif*" (Camus 1947, 272). Interestingly, he now defines himself as a contemporary who by chance had been placed at the center of the epidemic and has the intention to convey the many experiences without enhancing or distorting them. In other words, his objectivity stems from the decision to give space and voice to a plague-ridden community that is rigidly isolated from what had preceded and what would follow, and all that which is not part of it. The already mentioned hiatus, therefore, does not only concern the personal biography, it might also be specific to a world hit by the plague that by its nature suppresses subjectivity, individuality, and biographical continuity in its victims. In the following paragraph, conversely, the doctor evokes his being called to testify in

the legal sense of the term. Thereby, the plague puzzlingly turns out to be a kind of crime in which the narrator bears witness in favor of the “victims” (Camus 1947, 273) as if he had been an onlooker.

At the end of the last chapter, when the moment in which the story ends overlaps with the very moment in which doctor Rieux decides to edit it,²⁷ the chronicle is suddenly changed into a commemoration of the plague’s dead.²⁸ It is at this very moment that the narrator who always tried to keep himself at a distance acknowledges his isolation. The “chroniste” who in the first chapter is a happy member of the pre-plague city, appears as a nearly lone survivor, in the sense that he belongs to the very few who refuse to forget and to be carried along by the flow of life. Incidentally, this sensation may have been the reason why the novel starts with a completely detached voice of a chronicler. In sum, this twentieth-century novel, though being told by a fictional eyewitness and containing the writings of other eyewitnesses, is marked by a deliberate suspension or alienation of the first-person narrative. This is partly due to the voluntary act of attaining objectivity, but it may also be due to the trauma inflicted by both the devastation of the plague and by the subsequent forgetfulness and egoism of life. In other words, the novelist Albert Camus who brilliantly knew to deploy estranged first-person perspectives goes a step further by staging a first-person narrator who does not use the first-person pronoun. He is both inside and outside the plague-ridden community and goes on to stay even more isolated once the community is reunited with the rest of the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the plague writings from Thucydides to Camus showcase both the slow rise of the first-person perspective and a gradual movement from a historical or chronicle approach to a thorough fictionalization that, interestingly, does not completely abandon the original chronicle style. From the start, eyewitnesses emerge in plague writings, though initially only in isolated short passages. In both Thucydides and Boccaccio, these passages play an essential role inasmuch as they turn out to be

27 “Le docteur Rieux décida alors de rédiger le récit qui s’achève ici, pour ne pas être de ceux qui se taisent, pour témoigner en faveur de ces pestiférés; pour laisser du moins un souvenir de l’injustice et de la violence qui leur avait été faites, et pour dire simplement ce qu’on apprend au milieu des fléaux, qu’il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser” (Camus 1947, 279).

28 Famously, Shoshana Felman built her interpretation of Camus’s *La Peste* as a literary testimony to the impact of the Holocaust on these last paragraphs of the novel from Albert Camus. Autumn 1991. “Postwar Writings, Crisis of Witnessing.” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, vol. 3, no. 2, 197–242.

linked to what the plague description is meant to be about. Later, in Defoe's and Camus' novels, when the subjective perspective prevails, it does not manage to entirely pervade nor to dominate the narration of the epidemic. Whereas modern novels on war playfully experiment with the first-person perspective, a plague seems to set clear limits to the deployment of the first-person perspective.²⁹ Apparently, its overwhelming physical and mental impact continues to challenge the subject in the very act of narrating. The first-person narrator does not feel at ease with giving his own, naturally limited view of the disaster. Somehow the devastating and deindividualizing effect of the plague continues to beset any attempts to narrate epidemics. This is even true for fictional plague writings such as Camus' novel. The plague does not leave enough space for putting a first-person perspective center stage. Presumably, this situation will only change radically in the settings of science fiction novels that begin with the plague's aftermath. In the context of plague writings, personal experience remains a monolithic element in the narrator's life. Curiously, contrary to war novels, the plague writing does not feature the extent to which its victims cope with trauma after the disaster. The traumatization can be only sensed in the artificial suspension of the writer's identity as is the case in Albert Camus' *La peste* or in the strange opening of Defoe's Londoner self to its many peers, to the many other victims of the same plague. The eyewitness is certainly an important characteristic of plague writing. He can even evolve into a writer. Yet, he cannot access or build a place outside a plague-ridden world from which the traumatizing experience may be integrated into individual or collective development.

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29 Therefore, I do not agree with Elena Gomel's statement according to which "[w]riting becomes dying, not so much a means to survive as the endless postponement of the irreversible moment of death" (Gomel, 411).

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