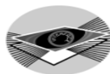INTERFACE
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Between Fiction and History: Telling the Plague in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Alessandro Manzoni's *Storia della colonna infame*

DAVIDE CROSARA
University of Rome "La Sapienza"

GIANLUCA CINELLI
Fondazione Nuto Revelli

Abstract

Daniel Defoe (1670-1731) and Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) represent two exemplary case studies of the European reflection about language, power, and pestilence in the context of Enlightenment due to their respective biographical positioning before and after that philosophical revolution. They both devote to the plague two diptychs (Defoe with the *Due Preparations for the Plague* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, and Manzoni with *I promessi sposi* and *La storia della colonna infame* in 1840) that encompass a tension between fiction and history, narrative and the archive. These tensions produce two different approaches to the plague and its narrative and two partially diverging evaluations of the interplay between fact and fiction in relation to such a traumatic event. Nonetheless, Defoe and Manzoni share the attempt to provide rational and truthful insight into the epidemic, its origins, and its social and economic consequences. Their narrators – the witness and the omniscient historian – accept that language cannot domesticate evil and suffering by framing them in an image, and for this reason, they tell their stories by combining different genres and styles, creating hybridised narrative forms capable of challenging the ideological notion of disease beyond the cultural context of Enlightenment. These historical narratives outline a discourse that resonates with the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: The plague in literature; Historical fiction; Daniel Defoe; Alessandro Manzoni; Enlightenment; Betrayal in literature

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The plague and other outbreaks of epidemics were frequent in early-modern Europe, and due to the limited competency of medical knowledge to tackle such scourges effectively, the political institutions tended to enforce drastic restrictions on individuals – the sick and the healthy as well – to reduce the contagion and avoid the spread of the disease. The traditional, almost universally shared interpretation of such events was metaphysical inasmuch as the plague-stricken communities tended to believe in supernatural causes such as God's wrath, extraordinary astronomical events (e.g. the passage of comets), or the malice of humans that would willingly manufacture and spread the deadly disease.

During the eighteenth century, as European culture was deeply transformed by the rationalistic revolution of Enlightenment, philosophers began to question the traditional response to the periodical outbreaks of the plague by criticising Leibniz's theodicy. As Odo Marquard explained, philosophers like Kant and Voltaire stated that humans bear the responsibility of evil as free moral agents, even though such a liability nonetheless requires the presence of God as the logical condition of moral liberty (1973, p. 62-63). It took a major disaster like the Lisbon earthquake (1755) to trigger a debate about the role and meaning of divine providence in the experience of evil and suffering. While Voltaire warned against worshipping the fetish of progress (2009, p. 326-327), Rousseau suggested that progress was a figure of providence (1971, p. 320). The philosophy of Enlightenment, thus, shifted the reflection on suffering and pain from the religious-metaphysical level to that of history (Löwith, 1967, p. 13), through a process of gradual but radical secularization.

Enlightenment, therefore, represents a watershed between two opposed ways of understanding the relationship between epidemics and human societies. What in early-modern Europe was conceived and endured as a scourge, in the face of which the humans were impotent, after the Enlightenment began to be understood as an event that had mechanic and natural causes that were only partially dependent upon human agency. Of course, God was not eliminated from the process leading to the formation of meaning, but individual moral responsibility was more and more recognised as the veritable arena of the fight between humankind and nature.

Daniel Defoe (1670-1731) and Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) represent two exemplary case studies of the European reflection about language, power, and pestilence in the context of Enlightenment due to their respective biographical positioning before and after that philosophical revolution. They both devote to the plague two diptychs (Defoe with the *Due Preparations for the Plague* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, and Manzoni with *I promessi sposi* and *La storia della colonna infame* in 1840) that encompass a tension between fiction and history, narrative and the archive. These tensions produce two different approaches to the plague and its narrative and two partially diverging evaluations of the interplay between fact and fiction in relation to such a traumatic event. Nonetheless, Defoe and Manzoni share the attempt to provide rational and truthful insight into the epidemic, its origins, and its social and economic consequences.

Both authors highlight the importance of the narration, from two different points of view: as he wrote his *Journal* when an outbreak of pestilence in England was at its peak in 1722 (the disease had already broken out in France), Defoe chose to represent the London plague of 1665 almost as a chronicler, by positing his narrator H.F. as a witness. Conversely, Manzoni, who wrote his novel and the historical appendix on the trials against the “anointers” between 1821 and 1840, looked at the Milanese plague of 1630 through the eyes of a historian who needs to inform his public about past events and, at the same time, amend a series of wrong historical interpretations of those facts.

A disturbing and complex notion of betrayal seems to emerge from Defoe and Manzoni alike. It is a multi-layered concept that is introduced as an instrument of historical enquiry and moral judgement. It is also a notion that provokes a captivating interplay between fiction and history in the two authors, a hybridization probably provoked by the catastrophic event itself, and by the necessity to find new means to measure and testify to its magnitude. The events they account for imply betrayal on several levels: political, cultural, moral, and intellectual. It is interesting to note how important the notions of "trust" and "trustworthiness" are for both authors as they speak about the human struggle with the plague and the attitude of the writer attempting to account for such a struggle. In the face of deadly forces, when fear prevails over social norms, legal bonds, and even private and intimate affection, loneliness and sociability assume a new shape and importance. The very fabric and nature of social and interpersonal interaction assume a new structure and people show their true colours. The writer – historian or novelist whatsoever – must on the one hand report positive facts while taking into account, on the other hand, the "intangible" human contribution to the shaping and evolution of the plague, that is, the emotional and moral reaction of people to the epidemic.

Their accounts are, therefore, sharply moralising: both authors intend to "fortify" their readers' moral strength by representing the legacy of previous outbreaks of the plague. Defoe explicitly enacts such purpose by anticipating a pestilence at its peak that would call Londoners to be brave, responsible, resilient, and to respond as a collective body. Manzoni pursues a more theoretical end as far as his essay appears at a political standstill for northern Italy and the city of Milan,[1] a condition which makes it look somewhat anachronistic in its appeal to criticise the reckless abuses that political institutions (and their functionaries) may perpetrate in times of danger. Thus, Defoe seems to imply, with sharp pragmatism, that in such hardship as that caused by the plague the indi-

1 In 1840, Lombardy was part of the Augsburg Empire of which Manzoni was, therefore, a citizen. After the failure of a plot in 1821, Lombardy failed to be annexed to the Kingdom of Sardinia again in 1848 due to the military defeat of King Carlo Alberto's army. Lombardy became part of the new-born Italian Kingdom only in 1859, after the second independence war, in the broader context of the Italian Risorgimento.

vidual should pursue his or her good by simultaneously and responsibly taking into account the good of society as a whole. The individual and society must endure the plague as a single body. Manzoni looked at keywords of Enlightenment such as progress and posterity with some scepticism, having experienced with disillusion the betrayal of the ideal of the Revolution by Napoleon's tyranny. Since he was always accompanied by a profound religious inspiration, he gives prominence, therefore, to the aspect of individual moral responsibility implying that in the face of suffering, morality and faith must guide the individual through the ordeal. To both authors, reason can amend the moral and historical betrayal perpetrated by humans and institutions, but progress must be looked at critically by means of storytelling; they both imply that a profound awareness of the past is the best antidote against the risk of repeating its errors over again.

However, both Defoe and Manzoni acknowledge that such a horror as that unleashed by a pestilence can be only partially told. Words cannot fully express the extreme experiences of abjection that Defoe identifies with the mass burials in the Pit, and Manzoni with the moral conflicts raging in the human conscience twisted by fear. Their narrators – the witness and the omniscient historian – accept that language cannot domesticate evil and suffering by framing them in an image, and for this reason, they tell their stories by combining different genres and styles, creating hybridised narrative forms (after all, Defoe and Manzoni respectively pioneered the art of novel-writing in England and Italy) capable of challenging the ideological notion of disease beyond the cultural context of Enlightenment.

1 Narrative and Embodiment in Defoe's *Journal*

In his realistic and simultaneously skilfully-orchestrated account of the London plague of 1665, H.F., the narrator of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, proposes a lucid analysis of how the city of London dealt with the pandemic and its catastrophic consequences. The memory of the 1665 pandemics and the outbreak of a second strain in 1722 determines

some of the text's major structural features, namely: the urge to analyse a disturbing notion of embodiment, both on the individual and the social level; the narrator's investment in a rationalistic stance capable of countering prejudice and paranoia; and, the search for a narrative form capable of coping with a radical break in received notions of humanism. After a brief introduction to these driving rhetorical elements of the *Journal* (and some references to Manzoni in relation to those), this first part of the article will concentrate on each single component of Defoe's discourse. Defoe, as Manzoni after him, tells a story of the pandemic that merges the individual and the collective level, micro and macro history. *The Journal*, however (and to a lesser extent the *Preparations*),[2] locates this interplay as the privileged site of a new notion of embodiment. The *Journal* is a tale of individual and social bodies experiencing catastrophe and death. It is indeed at the same time the personal tale of H.F. – a character whose consciousness is reshaped by the pandemics – and a collective narrative, the novel of London under the plague, the tale of its destruction and difficult recovery. In relation to this collective level, London stricken by the plague becomes a metaphorically ill body, defaced and altered by the disease:

> The face of London was now indeed strangely altered, I mean the whole mass of buildings, city, liberties, suburbs, Westminster, Southwark, and altogether; for as to the particular part called the city, or within the walls, that was not yet much infected. But in the whole the face of things, I say, was much altered; sorrow and sadness sat upon every face.
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 17-18)

The change in the urban landscape brought about by the pandemic is reproduced on the faces and in the gazes of the citizens: the body of the city absorbs the experience of individual bodies, their movements across desolate streets, and their attempt to find survival methods.

The pairing of the individual and social body is made apparent in the description of the protagonist's vicissitude. The first dilemma that H.F.

2 Defoe's *Due Preparations for the Plague* will henceforth be abbreviated as *Preparations*.

has to face is a dilemma of displacement: whether to leave London or stay. After a long dispute with his brother and a long interior struggle, H.F. resolves to stay in the city. This choice has two important, intertwined, consequences: firstly, it offers the reader a privileged viewpoint, that of the narrator, a witness who observes all the problems raised by the plague but who also comments upon them, producing an intersection between objective documentation and a subjective political commentary. The intermingling of fiction and history is a strategy that both Defoe and Manzoni use in order to examine the authorities' handling of the pandemic, and more broadly, the role of gossip, paranoia, and prejudice in modern societies. On a second level, the choice to remain assimilates the narrator's body to the body of the city, with the two becoming coextensive. The city stricken by the plague is at the same time a body objectively described in all its components and an ill body, which the narrator's gaze has to dissect and examine but also possibly heal by means of his narrative. This rationalistic attitude is a further connecting element between Defoe and Manzoni.

Taking a closer look at the depiction of embodiment in the *Journal*, it is not hard to notice that Defoe's description of the action of the plague on individual and social bodies is often accompanied by a lexicon of absence. For example, the attempt to flee from death transforms the city into a wasteland, a place abandoned by its defining dwellers:

> When I speak of Rows of Houses being shut up, I do not mean shut up by the Magistrates, but that great Numbers of Persons followed the Court, by the Necessity of their Employments and other Dependences; and as others retired, really frightened with the Distemper, it was a mere desolating of some of the Streets.[3]
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 19)

Although the novel is set in 1665, the first part of the quote hints at a contemporary event: the 1721-22 Quarantine Act, a measure of confinement which is problematically accepted by the narrator, but which was

3 In the quotes from the *Journal* the original capitalizations and spelling have been kept. All translations of quotes from works written in other-than-English languages are by the authors throughout the chapter, unless it is stated differently.

criticized by Defoe in his essays and articles (one of the most notable example being the *Due Preparations for the Plague*, completed shortly before the *Journal*), despite his support of Walpole's government. The first version of the Act received almost unanimous approval from Parliament. Among other things, it contemplated the possibility of embargoes of ships coming from abroad, the institution of *cordon sanitaires*, and strict confinement of single households when a family member contracted the disease. Strongly contested by merchants, the Country opposition in the House of Lords, Tories and disaffected Whigs, the Bill was amended in 1722, with the most contested clauses repealed.

The *Journal* registers the unequal impact of the plague both on individuals and social bodies: some have the means and skill to find a way to survive the disease, while others can only choose between dying in poverty or dying catching the plague. The poor in particular are "the most dangerous and the most liable to infection" (Defoe, 1992, p. 165). The *Journal* does only reflect all these passages, it offers an examination of the difficult coexistence between economy and freedom. Several studies have suggested that successive strains of plague across modern Europe followed the main trade routes in the continent.[4] In addition to this, social differences were exacerbated by the pandemic. Defoe's London shows how privileged social bodies, the Court, the aristocracy and part of the rising middle class have many more opportunities to escape: they can leave the city without great economic damage, continuing with their lives elsewhere. The lower social classes – the poor and all the people who depend upon their business – are forced to stay and endure much closer proximity to death, as indicated in the following passage:

> It is true a vast many People fled, as I have observed, yet they were chiefly from the West End of the town, and from that we call the Heart of the City, that is to say, among the wealthiest of the People, and such people as were unencumbered with Trades and Business. But of the rest, the Generality stayed, and seemed to abide the worst.
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 19)

4 See, on this point, Ricci and others (2017).

In this light, both Defoe and Manzoni analyse the role of beggars, the poor and small businesses in the spreading of the disease (Defoe provides data relating the infection rate and the economic and sanitary conditions of different areas in the city). They also signal how these people are frequently the ones most exposed to the action of charlatans, astrologers, spreaders of "fake news" and miraculous cures for the disease. Their lives are therefore doubly exposed: to the necessities of small businesses unable to choose between biological and economical survival, and to the new, rising economy of misinformation. Bringing upon the city's stage non-believers, apocalyptic preachers, fake doctors and forged truths, the plague creates bubbles where both individuals and social groups reset and redirect their economic and cultural needs according to their ideological orientation.

A social group, in particular, emerges in the *Journal*: the so-called anti-contagionists. H.F. faces them when inquiring about a man who has seen all his family loaded on the dead cart. They embody the belief that the disease was not really an infection, but derived from the so-called *contagium animatum*.[5] H.F. is verbally abused while trying to defend this desperate man. These people ignore any form of social distancing, and when the dead cart comes across the street they open the windows and "make their impudent mocks and jeers at them, especially if they [hear] the poor people call upon God to have mercy upon them" (Defoe, 1992, p. 56). The need to find a cause of the disease quickly acquired broader and darker dimensions. It led to the necessity to find scapegoats.

The scapegoats emerge in both Manzoni's work and Defoe's. In Manzoni, who wrote about a city in political turmoil and involved in the wars between European powers, the scapegoat became the anointers, imaginary figures who had a strong influence on public opinion. In Defoe, who lived in a nation which had already acquired a form of political unity, the scapegoats were the French, first as spreaders of the disease (the epidemic first struck Marseilles in May 1720), then as deniers of

5 The idea of the contagium animatum had been formulated first in the sixteenth century by Cardanus and Paracelsus, among others.

freedom and negative models used to attack the Quarantine Bill as liberticide. Defoe saw the dangers of nationalism and based his criticism of the Bill (both in the *Preparations* and in the *Journal*) on humanitarian and pragmatic principles: it abruptly separated families and communities, and it was almost impossible to enforce. He also vehemently attacked another strain of paranoid thought: the anti-contagionist doctrine which was regaining momentum at the turn of the century and which is incarnated by the group mentioned in the passage above. Anti-contagionists and nationalists found in George Pye's pamphlets a common reference point.[6]

Although the truth of the mob never became the truth of public authorities,[7] Defoe has to acknowledge that the truth of rational thought and that of the mob coexist in the same city, and seems to suggest that a difficult balance between the survival of economy and social responsibility needs to be found in order to heal society as a whole. The collective and individual again overlap: mobsters, anti-contagionists and all-believers constitute a counterpoint to the positive interaction between providential order and human action in which H.F., a dissenter imbued with pragmatism, believes.[8]

Once again this polarization finds in the body its most significant expression. It suggests a ghostly visitation in the description of the plague's action on the ill. But, more significantly, the city itself becomes the stage where large groups of people imagine angels "clothed in white" (Defoe, 1992, p. 23) and many other delusions, visionary truths more palatable than the empirical truths of science. By means of the converging action of half-truths, paranoia, and the plague, London becomes a city of ghosts and at the same time a ghostly city, peopled by living corpses and social bodies living in ignorance.

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6 Pye maintained that the plague depended on the quality of the air.

7 Manzoni on the contrary describes magistrates and politicians as the most hideous characters, exactly because they made large use of prejudice and paranoia for personal and political gains.

8 As indicated by Capoferro (2010, p. 70-71), Defoe's culture and education have a significant impact on the *Journal*'s "complex generic identity [...]. In Defoe […] the contrast, and the mediation, between empiricism and religion were a primary concern".

Poignantly, both Manzoni and Defoe describe these delusions in similar terms: the former describes the Milanese seeing the devil crossing the streets of the city on a coach carried by six horses, while in the latter these images influence and unbalance H.F.'s rationalizing stance, imbuing it with biblical images of exodus, damnation and apocalypse. Despite these disturbing presences, the *Journal* explores the changing notion of embodiment as a way to affirm a progressive view of society.

As a new Jerusalem or Nineveh, London is metamorphosed into a body leaving Earth. Defoe describes it as,

> While the Fears of the People were young, they were encreas'd strangely by several odd Accidents, which put altogether, it was realy a wonder the whole Body of the People did not rise as one Man and abandon their Dwellings, leaving the Place as a Space or Ground designed by Heaven for an Akeldama, doomed to be destroyed from the Face of the Earth, and that would be found in it, would perish with it.
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 20)

London as a body becomes also a culprit, and Defoe uses imagery related to the Aceldama to convey this. In the Christian tradition the Aceldama, or "potter's field", is alternatively the field bought by the high priests with the money given to Judas – and destined by them to the burial of strangers – or the field in which Judas himself was buried: in this second source the land, refusing to keep the traitor's remains, cracked open and expelled Judas's entrails. The image is very strong and it embodies London as a culprit convicted to receive the plague.

London is thus implicitly personified as Judas, the first traitor. A multifarious idea of betrayal permeates the whole work, something which is also true of Manzoni. In Defoe it is articulated on two main levels: the betrayal of reason and common sense seen above, and a betrayal rooted in British history, in this respect related to the body of the King. Many sermons published in 1665 (and probably consulted by Defoe) upheld the idea of the plague as a punishment for the city's sins, regicide in par-

ticular. London embodied Cain, an assassin spreading the king's innocent blood. The execution of Charles I was still a haunting presence in the city's memory in 1722, the year in which the *Journal* was published. H.F. obliquely refers to this historical event when he ironically describes the Court's flight from the city and its residence in Oxford during the Plague: Londoners had killed God (i.e. the King), and now God has left them. The medieval theory of the King's two bodies, which survived till the seventeenth century, definitely fades in Defoe's tale: the body of the King is absent, while the body of the city has to live in a new order in which the antithesis between nature and culture cannot be solved recurring to a superior power. As in Manzoni, a firm belief in the role played by providence in human history coexists with the necessity to provide an objective analysis of the pandemic, advocating for new models of ethics and responsibility.

The *Journal* makes use of bodily images to represent a new secular reality, a reality of absent kings and struggling bodies, reshaped and made formless by the Plague. As the *Journal*'s narrator, H.F. has to invent strategies to cope with "the formlessness of that horrendous physical reality" (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 291).[9] The concrete presence of this reified reality leads H.F. to engage in an uninterrupted conversation with death. Death is visible by means of its action on living bodies: i.e. the "tokens" on the ill. In such cases the narrative acquires a descriptive, positive, quasi-naturalistic stance: the narrator can express and communicate death, its presence announced but the ultimate outcome of its action postponed. When death's devouring effect takes centre-stage because of its immeasurable magnitude, the rhetorical structure of the conversation has to adapt accordingly. In such cases, the narrative device employed is erasure or obliteration.

This is evident in the treatment of the Pit, a vast burying place devised to contain the corpses of the dead in the parishes of Aldgate and Whitechapel, populous areas severely hit by the plague. H.F., animated by an insatiable, progressive curiosity, ignores the ban to visit the Pit. He actually visits the burying place twice, once during the daytime, the

9 The essay was originally published in PMLA 87 (1972), 417-423.

other at night. However, the gigantic hole in the land seems to challenge any description: on both occasions, the witness' gaze is blinded by the impossibility to describe it. Upon his first visit, H.F. cannot see anything because the corpses are immediately covered by the buriers. Upon his second, he goes there explicitly to see the bodies thrown from the carts into the Pit, and he declares that he has finally accomplished his goal. Nevertheless, his experience cannot be communicated to the reader, being literally unutterable: "This may serve a little to describe the dreadful Condition of that Day, tho' it is impossible to say any Thing that is able to give a true Idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this; that it was indeed *very*, *very*, *very* dreadful, and such as no Tongue can express" (Defoe, 1992, p. 53-54).

The indecency of a life so forcefully connected with death takes the bodies into the Pit and out of narrative possibilities. This negative climax is significantly followed by the description of the carts passing through the streets of London. H.F. is again hit by the indecency of their load, a mass of half-naked bodies, "some wrapt up in Linen sheets, some in Rags" (Defoe, 1992, p. 55). Every body seems destined to enter "into the common Grave of Mankind" (Defoe, 1992, p. 55). This consideration leads the narrator to raise questions about the future of the city after the plague. He examines the effect of the Pit, a gulf menacing London, and by extension any civilization. He also tries to determine to what extent this extreme experience could also represent a possibility of rebirth and renewal. A clear investment into reason clearly emerges at this point.

Following the narrator's interior struggle, the novel posits some positive replies to these questions. Despite the darkening presence of the Pit and the action of charlatans, the body of the city can experience a positive metamorphosis after the plague, which extends beyond the city's very boundaries. H.F. hypothesizes a future out of the city, outlining at the same time a possible renewal of society by means of a reassessment of the nature/culture relationship. The narrative presents episodes that act more as projections than commentaries on the present; they tend to anticipate a future after the plague. The most notable example in the

novel is the "Story of two Brothers and their Kinsman" (Defoe, 1992, p. 51). A soldier, a seaman, and a joiner regroup and use their skills and cunning to travel out of the city by land and river, passing checkpoints, building huts and camps, and finally receiving help, admiration and solidarity from the inhabitants of the small villages surrounding London. Defoe writes, "some sent them Chairs, Stools, Tables, and Such Houshold Things as they gave Notice they wanted; some sent them Blankets, Rugs, and Coverlids, some Earthen-ware, and some Kitchin-ware for ordering their Food" (Defoe, 1992, p. 117). The creation or the gift of an object provides human action with restorative possibilities: the body experiences regeneration by means of tools and objects. Further, the narrator imbues this adventure with a clear didactic purpose, stating,

> Their Story has a Moral in every Part of it, and their whole Conduct, and that of some whom they join'd with, is a Patern for all poor men to follow, or Women either, if every such a Time comes again; and if there was no other End in recording it, I thing this a very just one, whether my Account be exactly according to Fact or no.
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 100)

The moral of the story is projected into the future as a repository for memory, and it is reinforced by a peculiar dialectic structure where death and embodiment again play a crucial role. H.F. implicitly, but quite clearly, compares the three men's story with his personal vicissitude: they both are different reactions to the same catastrophic event. While the first is a tale of bodies in voluntary exile, the second one (H.F.'s) embodies the city's resilience. The three men's tale represents a future outside civilization; it is a quasi-post-apocalyptic narrative where a desolated and infected city, invaded by weeds and reduced to an archaeological site, is replaced by a utopian community where culture is driven by nature. The second (H.F.'s tale) enacts the great tragedy of the city as a collective body struggling for survival through the means of science and culture. H.F. clearly opts for urban resilience, even at a narratological level: his choice to stay in the city (as Defoe himself did in 1722) makes the narrative possible. In addition to this, his observations

and his analytical attitude define his role as a projector or examiner, a role confirmed by the insertion in the novel of historical documents such as the Lord Mayor Orders of 1665 and the weekly bills of mortality, or again by H.F.'s final acceptance of the public role of examiner of the houses in his precinct. As in Manzoni, a keen and profound examination of the pandemic event, its causes and consequences on individuals and societies, is pivotal to any remodelling of a humanist perspective.

The city's two bodies – one real, the other ideal – share a common investment in man as *homo faber* or *maker*: as H.F. is able to bake his own bread and brew his beer without leaving home, the little troupe of outsiders forges certificates of health, stages quixotic interludes, builds shelters and objects in order to survive outside the city. All the characters share an ability to understand reality and react to the extreme challenges of death, sometimes stretching the boundaries of narrativity. Not far from Manzoni, Defoe's illuminist perspective lies in hybridization of fiction and history. Defoe and Manzoni offer to the reader two temporal frames: one closer to fiction, the other more related to history. The *Journal*'s two tales (H.F.'s vicissitudes and the three men escapist tale)[10] are indeed projected in two different temporal horizons: one is located in a future outside received notions of civilization, one in the present, characterized by its active, ethical and political involvement in the management of the pandemic and its consequences. This temporal duality is reinforced by the setting of the text: located in 1665 Plague-stricken London, the *Journal* clearly alludes to the 1722 incoming pandemic. This dual chronological perspective is reinforced by the use of rhetorical devices such as digression and deferral. A significant shift in point of view also occurs: while the manualistic structure of the *Preparations* was incarnated by an assertive, extradiegetic author, the *Journal* offers the first-hand perspective of an autodiegetic narrator who constantly questions reality, acting as both recorder and participant in the events.[11] The dialogue between fiction and history corresponds to the displaying throughout the text of a dialectics between the interior time of consciousness (the *Journal* as *Bildung*) and the exterior time of a

10 Many individual stories punctuate the narrative, but H.F. gives this one a special emphasis.

11 On the *Due Preparations* and the *Journal*'s narrative structure, see Clegg (2021).

collective history. This dialectic, which corresponds to tension between individual and social bodies, becomes essential in the final part of the book when the narrator comments on London after the Plague. The novel accurately records the historical recovery of the city after the plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of the following year: the Stock Exchange reopens, the Court and the elite return, the limits to movement and trade are abolished, and London rapidly becomes the centre of an economic and construction boom that changes the face of the city. H.F. repeats his wish that economical recovery be accompanied by moral regeneration in the face of death: "Here we may observe, and I hope it will not be amiss to take notice of it, that a near View of Death would soon reconcile Men of good Principles one to another…" (Defoe, 1992, p. 140). But H.F.'s desire is left unfulfilled: the restoration of economic freedom does not necessarily correspond to a moral rebirth. The Journal, like the *Storia della colonna infame*, progressively acquires the tone of a tale commenting on the presence of evil in history. Despite the growing numbers of the economy, the plague has not changed humanity; the end of the pandemic does not indicate any new beginning. Solidarity can often be found only "on the other side of the grave".

However, the narrator does not give up on a positive investment in man as a maker; this time the instrument is the pen, and the maker is explicitly a poet or writer. This individual investment in fiction is frequently confronted with the historical vicissitudes of the city, which was literally remaking itself after the plague. The London of 1665 and the London of 1722 are connected by means of a quasi-fictional or quasi-historical narrator. We know that Henry Foe, the author's uncle, lived in London in 1665, but we don't know if he stayed in the city during the Plague. We also don't know if the novel is a fictionalized memoir: Daniel was five in 1665; therefore H.F., as his fictional counterpart, might also evoke and retell some of his personal memories. It is also important to remember that H.F. did not attribute a particular relevance to the truthfulness of the three man's tale: the account being described as "a very just one, […] be exactly according to fact or no". Even if the outcome of the *Journal* is a return to the city and civilization, the imaginative imprint of the three men's escapist tale and the hybrid structure of the narrative (part

history – part novel) guides H.F.'s reaction to the end of the pandemic. The return to normality is significantly often accounted for (as it happened during the current pandemic) as a loss or deprivation, as in the following description of the people returning to the city after the plague. Defoe writes, "The People being thus return'd, as it were in general, it was very strange to find, that in their inquiring after their Friends, some whole Families were so entirely swept away that there was no Remembrance of them left" (Defoe, 1992, p. 179).

The absent social bodies are here reduced to the smaller unit of families. A few sentences later, the process interestingly concentrates on single dead bodies, and one in particular. H.F. describes London's rebuilding process after the plague and the Great Fire as frenetic and almost unstoppable. A rebuilding committee was established after the Fire and a town planning scheme was presented and London was fully engaged in urban development supporting the nascent urban industry. Real estate speculation realigned "parishes on a strict grid with a church at the centre of each block" (Bender, 1992, p. 320-321).[12] This process involved burying fields. Being precious building land, many of them were converted to other uses: far from being a resting place, the grave was devoured by speculation and the bodies were exposed and abused a second time, not by death or by the plague but by the economy. Commodified, the corpses implicitly evoke and reverse the generative role of objects presented before in the escapist tale.

H.F., an examiner who observes, catalogues, and measures almost everything (including the dimensions and capacity of the Pit in the first part of the novel), finally offers the reader a list of the burying grounds undergoing such conversion. Number four on the list is "a piece of Ground in *Moorfields*, by the going into the Street which is now call'd *Old Bethlem*, which was enlarg'd much, tho' not wholly taken in on the same occasion" (Defoe, 1992, p. 181). And, as specified in the following author's note, "N.B. – The Author of this Journal, lyes buried in that very Ground, being at his own Desire, his Sister having been buried there a few Years before" (Defoe, 1992, p. 181).

12 The article was reprinted from chapter 3 of Bender's Imagining the Penitentiary (1987).

Defoe is even more radical than Manzoni. He does not merely advocate for dialogue between fiction and history (as the latter does), but, by means of an explicitly meta-narrative turn, he places H.F. among the dead, implicitly directing attention to the "real" author, Daniel Defoe, a living and public persona actively involved for the large part of his life in debates around the plague and its management. The return to a split chronology, opposing the book of the dead of 1665 to the "living book" of 1722, is further complicated by the stanza which concludes the *Journal*:

> A dreadful Plague in London was
> In the Year Sixty Five,
> Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls
> Away; yet I alive!
>
> H. F.
>
> (Defoe, 1992, p. 193)

H.F.'s body speaks to the reader from his grave, alive among the "thousands souls" swept away by the Plague, as symbolically testified by the semicolon separating "away" from "I alive" in the last verse. The poem can be read as an epigraph on H.F. 's grave and on the book as a whole. It constitutes a final display of displacement and a rhetorical invention out of the ordinary connecting again realism and fiction. H.F. declares to have placed his "coarse but sincere Stanza […] at the End of my ordinary Memorandums" (Defoe, 1992, p. 193). It is also a further complication of the text's layered and hybrid formal structure. If the novel is, as famously stated by Michail Bakthin, the genre that "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (1984, p. 7), H.F.'s death – simultaneously real and fictional – and the speaking presence of his body from the grave is the only unifying perspective in the *Journal*, connecting the two temporal frames and making the generic indeterminacy of the text acceptable and productive. This "real" body, which also constantly alludes to the textual body, is also the only token of memory in the midst of disaster, a way to make sense of the tragedy of history by means of literary imagination, and by extension a possible therapy against the

disease and its consequences on the social and cultural level. The textual body finally appears as a healing body. Manzoni's final choice to publish in the same volume *I promessi sposi* and *La storia della colonna infame* probably marks a similar attempt to heal the moral ambiguities of history through realism and fiction alike. The *Journal* implicitly declares that H.F.'s body exists, and needs to be remembered. *La storia della colonna infame* strongly advocates for the re-establishment of truth against the intentional manipulations of memory. Conflating fiction and history, the two texts reaffirm a tentative but possible rebirth of a humanist perspective.

2 Alessandro Manzoni's account of the Milanese plague of 1630

The plague that appears in chapters 31 and 32 of Manzoni's historical novel *I promessi sposi*[13] has the mythical meaning –in the frame of the fiction– of "fulfilment of individual destinies" and "necessary condition of the reconstruction of society, accordingly with the eternal Christian scheme of 'fall' and 'redemption' through atonement" (Nigro, 1988, p. 172). The two above-mentioned chapters follow the account – in chapter 28– of two other calamities that struck the Duchy of Milan between 1628 and 1630: the first is the war to conquest Monferrato and the Duchy of Mantova, fought by the French against the combined forces of Spain and the small Italian Duchy of Savoy (later on supported by the German mercenaries of the Sacred Roman Empire); the latter is the famine caused by the war in 1628-1629. The historical digression contained in chapters 28, 31, and 32 places the story of the fictional characters in the broader context of the events that affected social and political life in northern Italy during the Thirty Years War. Such conspicuous digressions (to which one must add several smaller ones in chapters 12, 22, and 27) were not groundless but rather functional to harmonise fiction with Manzoni's transcendent idea of history as the human tem-

13 The novel was initially titled *Fermo e Lucia* in its first unpublished version of 1821-1823. Manzoni resumed this work in the mid-1820s and published it in 1827 as *I promessi sposi*. The second and last edition of the novel appeared in 1842, after undergoing thorough linguistic revision. At this stage, the novel was accompanied by a short historical appendix called *Storia della colonna infame*, which accounted for the trial against suspected anointers during the Milanese plague of 1630. *Storia della colonna infame* went through painstaking rewriting between 1821 and 1840.

porality in which the divine providence makes itself manifest (Cinelli, 2014a, p. 155).

In chapter 28, by relying on the works and testimonies of seventeenth-century Milanese chroniclers,[14] Manzoni depicts the "ritratto doloroso" (Manzoni, 2004, p. 479)[15] of plague-stricken Milan, down the streets of which a "miserable troop" (Manzoni, 1845, II, p. 323) (soon after called a "deplorable multitude", [Manzoni, 1845, II, p. 327]) of hungry and desperate people swarms. Unlike Defoe, Manzoni does not personify the city or look at its population as a body stricken down by the calamities of war, famine, and disease. However, like the English writer, he shows some sort of "sociological" interest in the *notizie positive* that he can find about the famine and the plague: the former seems to bring for the first time some equalisation among social classes, insofar as the rich and powerful who once strutted around boldly, surrounded by their bodyguards, the so-called *bravi*, now beg or wander in shabby clothes.

The staggering increase of beggars triggered the epidemic. With the rise of the temperature in the spring of 1630, and due to a shortage of money, which the Spanish Governor Ambrogio Spinola spent for the war, the Tribunal of Health decided to gather all the beggars in one single lazaretto even by force, by employing the police and offering a reward to those who conducted any beggar to the lazaretto. In a few weeks, the camp was overcrowded with more than 10.000 people, and as the first fevers appeared the Tribunal decreed to open the gates and allow the healthy beggars to leave.

In the same months, the German *Landsknechts* entered the Duchy of Milan to besiege Mantova against the French. These mercenary troops lived off the land and terrorised the population with robberies, devasta-

14 Like Defoe, who based his account of the London plague on three different sources produced by a historian, a physician, and a clergyman (Keys, 1944, p. 52), Manzoni relied on seventeenth-century sources too, among which the chronicles by clergyman Giuseppe Ripamonti and physician Alessandro Tadino stand out (see Girardi, 1977, p. 32). A thorough discussion of the use of archival sources in *I promessi sposi* and *Storia della colonna infame* can be found in Codebò (2006, p. 189-190).

15 The quoted expression cannot be found in the English version sourced in this article because the translator cut off the entire sentence.

tion, and rapes. Manzoni learns from the chroniclers that it was an Italian mercenary enlisted among the Spaniards, who brought the plague to Milan in the first place:

> This unfortunate soldier, and bearer of misfortune, entered Milan with a large bundle of clothes, bought or stolen from German soldiers; he went to lodge with some relations in the suburb of the Eastern-gate, near to the Capuchin convent; but scarcely had he arrived, when he fell sick, and was carried to the hospital, where a plague-spot, which showed itself below the arm-pit, excited the suspicion of his medical attendant. The fourth day he died. The Tribunal of Health commanded the house which he had inhabited to be condemned, and his relatives to be confined within it. His clothes and the bed upon which he had died at the hospital were burned.
>
> (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 25-26)

"Patient zero" infected his landlord, family and servants and soon after the plague spread in the neighbourhood. The Tribunal of Health, however, was inadequate to tackle the contagion. If, on the one hand, the physicians underestimated the danger and attributed the increasing deaths to other causes, on the other hand,

> The terror of the lazaretto sharpened all wits; the sick were concealed; the grave-diggers and their superintendents were corrupted; false certificates even were purchased from the subalterns of the Tribunal itself, who were deputed by it to inspect the dead bodies. Yet upon every discovery which they succeeded in making, the Tribunal ordered the burning of property, the sequestration of houses, the sending of whole families into the lazaretto; therefore it is easy to infer what must have been the anger and murmurs of the people, of the nobility, of the merchants, and of the lower classes, persuaded as they all were, that these were only useless and ridiculous annoyances.[16]

16 Compulsory seclusion and quarantine of the sick and their families was enforced only after the Black Death of 1348 alongside the establishment of lazzaretti and Tribunals of Health in cities like Venice and Milan (see Cipolla, 2007). It is also remarkable that such measures did not rest on universal

(Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 27)

Nonetheless, the plague spread through the city and the physicians, who did not admit their mistake yet, began to talk about a "malignant" or "pestilential fever" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 29). The Tribunal then decided to entrust the Capuchin Friars with the management of the overcrowded lazaretto, a fact that Manzoni does not miss to comment with irony. It is also striking to notice how similarly Manzoni and Defoe highlight the widespread hostility of the populace towards the practice of isolating and secluding the families of the sick. Both in London and Milan, household leaders deceived the authorities by concealing the sickness of their relatives or even bribed the officials to avoid restrictions, destruction of property, and seclusion.

At this stage, a new character enters Manzoni's narrative, who will become more and more essential in his discourse about the plague: the anointer. As it was impossible to deny the violence of the contagion, and yet the denial of its natural causes remained unmovable, an idea rather common at the time began to circulate, that of "magical arts, diabolical operations, and people leagued together to spread the plague by means of contagious poisons and sorcery" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 33). Manzoni mentions that this was an old and consolidated belief[17] and that, to make it worse, news broke from Madrid in 1629 that four Frenchmen had left Spain taking with them pestilential anointments. The idea of the anointers, although irrational and unlikely, soon became popular because "when disease strikes humans and they suffer, the identification of a scapegoat seems inevitable" (Geremia, 2021, p. 79). In fact, during a catastrophic epidemic, when the institutions find themselves

prophylactic criteria but were rather affected by prejudice and discrimination as demonstrated in Massong (2021).

17 Several studies testify to the fear of pestilential anointment in Early Modern Europe. Claudia Geremia writes that "between the Middle Age and the Early Modern Age, minorities were blamed for the plague and it was not enough to condemn them. God's wrath, caused by sinners, had to be appeased by sacrifices" (2021, p. 80). In the specific case covered by Geremia, Catholic Inquisition blamed the ethnic minorities subjugated on the Canary Islands by Spanish and Portuguese colonisers. Likewise, Muslims and Jews were repeatedly lynched by furious mobs of Christian inhabitants in the European plague-stricken cities since the fourteenth century, as shown by Samuel Cohn (2007). According to Leonardo Sciascia, the figure of the anointer appeared for the first time during the plague of 1576, "quando colto sul fatto ([…]: ma quale fatto?) un ignoto fu impiccato" (1990, p. xxvi).

unable to stop it, it is rather common that "the entire responsibility for the crisis is collectively transferred upon the scapegoat" (Girard, 1974, p. 843). Collective fear of anointers broke out because "it is more agreeable to attribute evil to human wickedness against which you can vent anger and vengeance, than to recognise in it a cause which leaves you only the possibility of resignation" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 43). In May 1630 foreigners and people who were suspected of acting "strangely" were assaulted, arrested, or even lynched and everywhere people began to see mysterious traces of dirt and filth. Things that were normal two months before now became evidence of malicious contagion.

However, the absence of anointers in Defoe's account of the plague suggests that not everywhere in sixteenth-century Europe people believed in their existence, which can perhaps be explained by considering the diverse historical contexts of Milan in 1630 and London in 1665. Differently to Defoe's London, which had recently recovered from a long and troubling civil war, Manzoni's Milan lay at the centre of a battlefield where foreign armies had been clashing for over eleven years. The terror of foreign soldiers and the despise of political institutions chaired by prominent foreigners who did not care about local populations planted the seeds of mistrust and fear. Thus, while in London the institutions remained firmly in their place (yet not the Court, towards which Defoe is critical) and the officials kept working despite the risks of falling sick and dying, in Milan the institutions were weak and inept, corrupted and ready to indulge the populace's moods rather than administer law and justice. Instead of confuting the rumours, the Tribunal of Health legitimated the suspicion that anointers were at bay, starting a panic. The political discourse about the anointments even degenerated when the Tribunal of Health announced that those who denounced any act of anointing would be granted a reward and *impunity*, which shows "a condescension all the more blameable as it was pernicious" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 37). Not only did the authorities encourage the shameful practice of spying, under circumstances of distress and social tension, but the decree even foreshadowed the involution of political agency into that "grey zone", in which politicians indulge illegality to provide themselves with the means – licit and illicit – to fulfil the duties they should

carry out but are not up to. The "perniciousness" of the decree consists in that the Milanese political institutions used their powers not guided by justice and compassion but by employing force, malice, and treachery.

In chapter 32, Manzoni reports the events of the war to explain its impact on the disastrous management of the sanitary emergency in Milan. When the Council of Ten plead with the Spanish Governor Spinola for financial measures aimed at making more funds available for the Tribunal of Health, the representative of King Philip II deputed Chancellor Antonio Ferrer as his lieutenant in Milan. At the same time, the Council of Ten also requested Cardinal Federigo Borromeo to organise a solemn procession to carry the relics of Saint Carl around the city to stop the epidemic. Of course, this accelerated the spread of the plague. However, no one blamed the folly of gathering thousands of people in a procession:

> Yet (astonishing and deplorable power of prejudice!) the greater number did not attribute this effect to the assembling of such an immense concourse of people for so long a time, or to the increase of fortuitous contact; but to the facility afforded to the poisoners for the execution of their diabolical designs. It was said, that mixing with the crowd, they had infected with their poison as many persons as came in their way.
>
> (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 49)

The spreading of the plague was accompanied by the belief that the devil himself had come to Milan on board a coach carried by six horses. As public discourse intertwined with popular belief, the few who still resisted the thesis of the anointments were overwhelmed by public frenzy (Preto, 1987, p. 64). No one remained, thus, who said that the disastrous sanitary emergency in Milan vastly depended on the inefficiency and indifference of the Spanish government.[18] Manzoni writes

18 "Lenta, ma inesorabile, tra proclami e bandi inascoltati, in un atteggiamento di scetticismo e quasi di irridente indifferenza degli organi governativi e sanitari, preoccupati più di minimizzare il problema che di risolverlo, la peste si era fatta largo già a partire dal 1629. L'arrivo di un inverno rigido ne aveva rallentato momentaneamente la diffusione, alimentando un precoce quanto sciagurato clima

that according to Alessandro Tadino – despite the divergence of other chroniclers' opinions on this matter – after the plague the population of Milan shrank to about 64.000 inhabitants, whereas there were 250.000 in 1629.

On the eve of summer 1630, all was set for the beginning of the trials of the anointers. This unsettling page of history, unknown to Defoe's London, was well-known to Verri and Manzoni, who devoted to its critical examination an important part of their respective historical and philosophical reflections.[19] In *Storia della colonna infame* Manzoni suddenly changes the scale of his historical investigation and abandons the broad scenario of the war to concentrate on a "micro-historical" event. Insofar as when one changes scale does not see the same things differently but rather begins to see *other things* (Ricoeur, 2000), in this work Manzoni focuses on the individual characters involved in the history of the trial. In *Storia della colonna infame*, which shares with the novel the thorough psychological introspection of the characters, the readers come across living characters portrayed in full detail with their personalities and stories, as far as Manzoni strives to get some insight into their minds, feelings, and emotions. Whereas history entered the novel in the form of isolated digressions, here it combines with storytelling in a form of historic-drama (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 311-312).

The history of the Milanese trial begins on June 21, 1630, at about 4.30 in the morning, as Caterina Rosa, who is depicted as "a woman of humble condition", is "unfortunately" standing at her window in Via della Vedra and sees a man approach. He carries a parchment in his hand and seems to be writing. The man now and then scrubs his hand against

euforico. Pericolosi movimenti di truppe alla volta del Monferrato, teatro di una guerra di successione, uniti alla discesa di lanzichenecchi diretti nel mantovano e ad altri episodi di assembramenti di folla, quali i festeggiamenti in occasione del carnevale e in onore della nascita dell'infante di Spagna, determinarono, nella primavera del 1630, l'esplosione del contagio, destinato, per un gioco della sorte, a divenire incontenibile dopo la processione dell'11 giugno, autorizzata dal Cardinale Federico Borromeo proprio per invocare un aiuto soprannaturale nella lotta al male" (Garlati, 2011, p. 397).

19 Pietro Verri's *Osservazioni sulla tortura*, written in 1776 but published only in 1804, constitutes the main connection between the memory of the plague conserved in the archives and Manzoni. I will not linger on highlighting the differences of intents and outcomes and the similarities of style and rhetorical argumentation existing between the *Osservazioni*, chapters 31-32 of Manzoni's novel and *Storia della colonna infame*, because this lies beyond the scope of this article. See Garlati (2011, p. 410-424); and Cinelli (2014b, p. 89-90).

the wall and his gesture recalls – in Caterina's mind – the rumours about "those who for the last few days had been anointing the walls" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 224). "Seized with this suspicion", the woman keeps an eye on the Unknown until he gets out of sight. On the same street, there is a second observer, a woman called Ottavia Bono. When questioned by the guards, later on, she will tell that she also saw the man write on his paper but not touch the wall. It turns out, during the inquiry, that the man was actually writing, the reason why he cleaned ink from his fingers by touching the wall, against which he was walking to protect himself from the rain. However, Caterina states that "the man acted as if anointing the wall" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 225). She believes in the existence of anointers and this is sufficient to change her impression into truth, subverting the whole logical process. The devilish plot is on, entirely built on fear and suspicion.

It is interesting to note how Manzoni shifts from the large scale to a smaller one, from the public frenzy fuelled by political discourse to individual illogical reasoning. Here Manzoni looks into the very process of derangement which changes reason into madness. The perspective is capsized: in the novel, the discourse on the plague seemed to spread top-down, although false opinions and popular superstition also nourished the theories of charlatans and politicians. Here, the tale of the conspiracy spreads bottom-up as rumours and hocus-pocus.

After the turmoil raised by Caterina, people begin to see the walls anointed with a mysterious substance, which the authorities identify with evidence of the crime. Manzoni calls it "a circumstance that would have appeared very improbable in a romance, but which illustrates only too fully the blindness of passion" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 226). The inkstand that Caterina saw in the Unknown's hands too easily turns into a "vase" full of who knows what mysterious venom. Other people, questioned about the substance soiling the walls, say that they had not even noticed it until the whole thing of the anointment was brought up. Thus, as the rumour spreads, the Unknown is identified as Guglielmo Piazza, an official of the Tribunal of Health. The Senate, informed that a street has been anointed, issues an arrest warrant. Fear has gone full

circle and Manzoni writes: "with these words, already full of a deplorable certainty, and which passed from the lips of the multitude to those of the magistrates, the trial opened" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 228).

What fuels the obstinacy of the interrogators is the "firm persuasion" and the universal "terror of a chimerical attempt" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 228-229). Thus, "the more enlightened classes" participate "in the wicked delusion" that has already taken the upper hand on popular minds (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 229). Fear is the common feeding ground of both popular belief and political error. Ignorance may justify the former, while the latter can be explained by "exasperation", as far as the Milanese Senate find themselves unable to provide the population with any solution, explanation, and protection as the plague kills by the thousands. Fear of appearing unfit to rule drives the Senate to look for a scapegoat, and Guglielmo Piazza is the perfect victim of such a perverted purpose. However, Piazza is innocent, so his interrogators can force him to confess the crime only by torturing him.

At this stage, it is the judges of the court who carry out a double betrayal (Volpi, 2008, p. 166): towards the Senate, because they apply torture without their authorization; and towards Piazza, who is falsely offered impunity in exchange for the names of his accomplices (orally and in private conversation, not during the official interrogation). Manzoni tries to imagine the "struggles of this soul, which the memory of the recent tortures doubtless filled, now with the fear of personal suffering, now with fear of causing suffering to others" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 274). Piazza eventually betrays another "unfortunate man", Giangiacomo Mora, a barber who lives and works in Via della Vedra, claiming that Mora gave him the anointment to spread. Mora is easy prey: the guards find in his house "a small brick oven containing a small copper boiler" with some muddy water and slimy matter at the bottom. It is just "lye to wash with" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 284), he says, but in the eyes of the authorities, the substance is, of course, something worse. They also find a recipe that Mora tries to destroy and that will be eventually used against him in the trial.

Manzoni uses the verb "to fabricate" to mean the "deal of difficulty and trouble" by which Piazza builds his logical picture of the criminal plot that, of course, has no motive and is, therefore, inconsistent (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 278). Nonetheless, the judges believe his absurd story because they have no other clue and yet need to find a culprit. Thus, we see two parallel "fabrications": Piazza rehearses and builds an unlikely plot to involve Mora in the crime, and the Tribunal conjures fantastic evidence of a non-existing crime to justify the arrest and torture of the barber. Mora, in turn, mentions other people to save himself and eventually accuses Gaetano Padilla, a Spanish nobleman, of being the real "criminal mind" behind the plot. Not one single iota of these "fabrications" is questioned critically by judges and the members of the Senate alike.

Padilla, however, unlike the others, is a prominent member of the Spanish political elite and can afford a lawyer, claiming the right to a regular trial. The crime, Padilla's lawyer simply argues, has no "*corpus delicti*", which spares the defendant torture and easily discharges him of all accusations. However, the trial goes on to its bitter end for the others:

> The infernal sentence decreed that, placed upon a car, the doomed men should be conducted to the place of execution; that they should be gashed with a hot iron, during their progress; have the right hand struck off before Mora's shop; have their bones broken on the wheel; be bound alive to the wheel, and raised from the ground, and at the end of six hours be put to death; that their bodies should be burnt, and their ashes be cast into the river; that the house of Mora should be demolished; and that upon its site, a column should be erected, called the Column of Infamy.
>
> (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 327)

The execution unfolds as a narration (*progress*) and a theatrical display of vengeful wrath.[20] The original crime scene, Mora's house, becomes

20 "Le supplice judiciaire est à comprendre aussi comme un rituel politique. Il fait partie, même sur un mode mineur, des cérémonies par lesquelles le pouvoir se manifeste. [...] Le supplice a donc une fonction juridico-politique. Il s'agit d'un cérémonial pour reconstituer la souveraineté un instant blessée. Il la restaure en la manifestant dans tout son éclat. L'exécution publique, aussi hâtive et quotidienne

the stage of such a political display of justice, where the two men are mutilated and entwined alive on the wheel, the house itself is destroyed and replaced by a monument. While the body of the accused has been so far the place where private and secret violence was perpetrated, the body of the executed men becomes the place where violence is publicly displayed as political vengeance. Piazza and Mora are the scapegoats whose sacrifice must reconcile the various parts of a disaggregated social and political body.

As we have seen, betrayal occurs on both public (political) and private (moral) levels, stretching from the sphere of discourse to that of feelings. Politics betray with their discourse in the forms of decrees (*gride*), as well as by promising fake impunity. Private betrayal occurs in the sphere of conscience, where the individuals deal with the moral principles they ought to comply with in order to do the right thing. Indignantly, Manzoni blames the judges for corrupting the innocent thus making them guilty: "By means of their impunity and torture, these judges succeeded, not only in causing two innocent men to perish by a fearful death, but caused them, as far as lay in their power, to die guilty" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 328), by using weapons "taken from the arsenal of jurisprudence" but striking their blows "arbitrarily and treacherously" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 305). Manzoni focuses on moral responsibility because he claims that "it was not the man of the seventeenth century who reasoned thus illogically, it was the man of passion" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 295).

Passion is again the source of one further form of betrayal, i.e. that of the historians who handed down the story of the trial since 1630. In the seventh and last chapter of *Storia della colonna infame*, Manzoni unfolds the series of the "historical effects"[21] which he has critically

qu'elle soit, s'insère dans toute la série des grands rituels du pouvoir éclipsé et restauré" (Foucault, 1975, p. 51-52).

21 According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, historical comprehension implies the rhetorical practice of "application", which means that the historian reads sources critically and from a different perspective than that from which they were produced. In turn, the historian must accept that future interpreters will comprehend his or her words differently than he or she meant them. Thus, "the line of meaning [...] always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy" and the historian must understand that comprehension is "effected" by all the singular acts of intermediation that put the historian in contact with the tradition. In turn, the historian is also a "historical effect", which future generations will have to

engaged and questioned. Historians like Muratori and Giannone are sternly criticised because they refused to admit the judges' error and the innocence of the slaughtered people in the name of "peace of mind", thus "following one after the other, like Dante's sheep" (Manzoni, 1845, III, p. 222). Their betrayal was intellectual, for they did not delve deep into the sources; moral, for they refused to challenge a clear injustice; and political, for they underrated the responsibility of the historian in the face of posterity. Manzoni believed that the historian must be critical and engage the sources to force them to reveal what they pass over in silence, which explains why he saw in fiction a way of providing insight into a blurred page of history, and therefore into the unfathomable ways of providence:

> *I promessi sposi* and *Storia della colonna infame* articulate, albeit in different fashions, Manzoni's project of making the examination of archival records the center-piece of not only historical research but of any historical narrative, whether fictional or not. Both *I promessi sposi* and *Storia della colonna infame* can be viewed as experiments in which Manzoni attempts to verify if, and how, he can apply the document and the narrative, i.e. the resources of the archive and those of the novel, to a truthful rendition of the past.
>
> (Codebò, 2006, p. 188)

Unlike Defoe, who tells the story of the plague from the first-hand perspective of an autodiegetic narrator, Manzoni chooses the way of detachment, first by inventing the Anonymous narrator of the novel,[22] and second by openly relying on archival sources to weave the narration as a historian.

In the early 1820s, as Manzoni began to write his novel, the history of the trial against the anointers was only a long digression that should be excised from the main plot of the *Fermo e Lucia* – as the novel was

bear in mind while interpreting the tradition (2004, p. 335-336).

22 Manzoni presents the novel *I promessi sposi* as the re-writing of an old seventeenth-century manuscript written by an anonymous author.

originally titled. In 1827, the history of the trial was re-written (like the novel) into a new text called *Appendice storica*, which, however, remained unpublished. In 1824, Manzoni had pondered about publishing it as an autonomous text, but because the trial against the Milanese political dissident Federico Confalonieri had ended just a few months before with a death sentence,[23] Manzoni decided not to divulge his work to avoid retaliation (Nigro, 2002, p. xii-xiii). Manzoni feared that the Austrian authorities would easily recognise in his work on the anointers some reference to the trials against the Milanese *carbonari* Federico Confalonieri and Silvio Pellico. By 1840, when *Storia della colonna infame* was ready, Manzoni's conception of literature had radically changed. In 1827 he had stated that "the true alone is beautiful" (*"il vero solo è bello"*) (Manzoni, 1981, p. 207),[24] thus distancing himself from fiction that, in his opinion, by that time had degenerated in the "Romanesque" (*romanzesco*), something averted from history (truth). The novel (fiction) and the story of the trial (history) were now published together as the two faces of the same coin and yet presented as utterly different objects that shared one main concern: the presence of evil in history and its problematic justification as a moral aberration. Their accounts identify the ideal site for such a epistemological enquiry in the modern urban scene: the city is at the same time the place where progress can be seen at its peak and the stage where "the plague shows that there are times when the whole city is nothing but human fragility writ large" (Gordon, 1997, p. 76).

3 Conclusion

Defoe and Manzoni offer a sharp and severe analysis of humanity be-

23 Federico Confalonieri was a supporter of the cause for Lombardy's independence from the Augsburg Empire, a collaborator of the journal *Il conciliatore*, a member of the secret society Carboneria since 1820, and a friend of Manzoni. After the failure of the Milanese insurrection in 1821, he was arrested, trialled, and eventually sentenced to death in 1823. The penalty was lessened in 1824 to a life sentence. Confalonieri was eventually pardoned in 1835. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/federico-confalonieri_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/

24 The idea of the *Discorso* rose already in 1827 as a response to Goethe's negative remarks about the historical chapters of *I promessi sposi*. The *Discorso*, however, underwent a long revision and was published only in 1850.

fore and after the plague. Their gaze illuminates the paranoid attitudes, the contradictions and the moral dilemmas generated by the pandemic event. It certainly offers a progressive and secular perspective, attempting at the same time to justify the latter's incorporation into a providential vision. However, they both retain a pragmatic, disenchanted conception of history. While they acknowledge the limits and failures of individual and collective memory, they also seem to imply that history, far from being linear and progressive, can lead to regression and contradiction. *The Journal* and *La storia della colonna infame* intend to foster a greater awareness of the traumatic event in eighteenth and nineteenth post-pandemic Britain and Italy; however, this new knowledge conceals an illusion: the idea that the plague necessarily brings to a better society. Despite their different approaches and aims, Defoe and Manzoni contribute to tearing the veil off this illusion.

They both narrate the plague's impact on seventeenth-century societies in London and Milan by combining several rhetorical strategies and genres, namely history, novel, chronicle, and judiciary report. The intellectual framework through which they approach the topic is of paramount importance; it is rationalistic insofar as they belong to the cultural milieu of the European Enlightenment. For different reasons, however, their rationalism also blends with the metaphysical belief in divine providence as a power that shapes the events in human lives. Defoe's empiricism is that of a man immersed in a flourishing mercantile society, of which he also sees a flaw in the tendency to superimpose the reasons of the economy over ethics. Manzoni's spiritualism fits his post-Enlightenment disappointment in the aftermath of Napoleon's wars, which culminated in the Vienna Congress, restoration of the old regimes, and a general betrayal of the revolutionary ideals. While Defoe looks at the historical past to interpret a crisis unfolding in the present, Manzoni's gaze on the past encompasses an allegorical reflection on how evil recurs and affects all human experiences, both in the public and private spheres, notwithstanding the historical context.

These two different perspectives suggest a few considerations about our present experience of the pandemic. On a more general level, a meta-

physical interpretation of the pandemic may not have circulated (or, if it has, it was limited to a few religious leaders who did not gain a large audience). Nonetheless, several conspiracy theories have somehow replaced it as a surrogate of rational explanation. The followers of these theories respond today to their principles and statements, not unlike those believers who adhered to religious and superstitious interpretations of the epidemic in the seventeenth century: in lieu of the devil and anointers, conspiracy theorists claim that Covid-19 was manufactured in secret laboratories to force governments all around the world to enforce restrictions and strict social control. In relation to Defoe's and Manzoni's overlapping of collective and individual levels, the historical experience of changing habits – in private and in public – draws significant similarities between the present and the seventeenth century: the relationship between individual and society was affected in both cases by isolation, fear, social distancing, suspicion, and the abnormal perception of political power as a coercive force that pursues ends that often stand in open contrast with self-perception, social identity, and ethics.

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