

## A Response to Alan Rosen, "Plague, Fire, and Typology in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*"\*

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. . . ut per omnia referret supremam illam exustionem . . .

The inscription on the Monument, erected to commemorate the Great Fire of London, emphatically confirms Alan Rosen's contention that the Great Fire was considered the typological counterpart of the biblical destruction of the world by fire. In a comment on some of the aspects of his contribution, it may be useful to recall that "typology," as used by Rosen, is synonymous with "the broadened typology" discussed in J. Paul Hunter's influential book on Defoe's emblematic method (1966).<sup>1</sup> In two studies of Defoe Zimmerman followed Hunter in claiming that to the dissenters "biblical types could be prefigurations not only of later biblical events, but also of later history."<sup>2</sup> As the subject and the concept were given due attention in Paul Korshin's important analysis of typologies in England (Rosen 273-75),<sup>3</sup> typology became a recognized topic in Defoe criticism.

### I

Alan Rosen attempts a detailed analysis of the seventeenth century typological interpretation of disasters such as the plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666. On the level of biblical referents, the flood and the fire, marking the beginning and the end of history, were of great importance. Especially the destruction of the world by fire was, as it

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\*Reference: Alan Rosen, "Plague, Fire, and Typology in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 258-82.

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For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/daniel-defoes-a-journal-of-the-plague-year/>>.

seems, a kind of mythic type which was held to correspond to the Great Fire of London.

The Great Fire, however, if viewed in a homiletic or a more strictly typological context, was not consistently linked to the "suprema exustio." Despite the examples quoted by Rosen the underlying type was not necessarily "the paradigmatic destruction by fire in the heralded future" (262). Some doubts, therefore, may be raised as to the strength of the teleological meaning of the Fire, which is at the core of Rosen's argument. The religious interpretation of the Great Fire indeed took on different shapes and forms. Having, in support of Rosen's view, mentioned the Monument, it seems appropriate not to forget the little statue which reminds us of the Great Fire at the corner of Cock Lane, in Smithfield. It marks the place where the fire was said to have stopped, and represents a surprisingly fat boy. Judging from the contemporary legend inscribed on the statue, the boy is an emblematic embodiment of sin. It was "Put up for the Late Fire of London Occasion'd by the Sin of Gluttony, 1666." So the Great Fire was, to the simple dissenter of the day, an instance of divine retribution, as it was to the much more sophisticated Thomas Vincent,<sup>4</sup> who is Rosen's major witness. An acute sense of the dealings of God—here and now—with a sinful world pervades his panoramic view of the Great Fire, and it accounts for the metamorphosis of the typological emblem he uses:

The burning then was in the fashion of a bow, a dreadful bow it was, such as mine eyes never before had seen: a bow which had God's arrow in it with a flaming point. It was a shining bow, not like that in the cloud which brings water with it and withal signifies God's covenant not to destroy the world any more with water, but it was a bow which had fire in it, which signified God's anger and his intention to destroy London with fire.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that Vincent, in the passage here quoted, in order to make his point, adapts to the present a type originally referring to the past (Genesis 9:13-16).

Even before 1666, Puritan preachers had made good use of fire as God's punishment for the sinful. As early as 1658 one Walter Costelo was a typologist before the event:

Oh London! London! Sinful as Sodom and Gomorrah! The decree is gone out.  
Repent, or burn, as Sodom, as Gomorrah!<sup>6</sup>

As the typological referents of the fire differ, I hesitate to promote a single one to the rank of paradigm, to the detriment, as it were, of the others, and to attribute to the "paradigmatic fire, located in the future" (263) the dominant role it plays in Rosen's theory. Although I admire Rosen's systematizing, I take the view that the fire may correspond to several types, all of which have scriptural authority, and therefore deserve to be called "paradigms."

## II

In Rosen's analysis of the typological groundwork of history, there is an assumption of what I may be allowed to call "a hierarchy of disasters." He argues that "in contrast to the decided emphasis on the place of flood and fire at the extremes of the historical continuum, the plague can seemingly occur at any point along the way" (264). As a consequence, a pairing of fire and plague is seen as potentially "activating a conventional typological schema" (264), whereas Defoe's "circumvention of the Great Fire" actually "deactivated the conventional typological schema" (265). In this view, the Great Fire becomes a kind of catalyst bringing about, in addition, the typological meaning of the plague. So, by deliberately keeping at arm's length and even disregarding the potent fire, Defoe pursues a strategy of "selective omission" (280n8), which constitutes the *Journal's* "polemic against typology" (275), thus paving the way for Defoe's realism (275) and his "tragic mode" (279).

Attractive as this line of thought may be, it should not make us lose sight of other reasons which may explain Defoe's focus. Defoe's selection of subject was in more ways than one related to the specific background of the 1720s. The Great Fire of 1666, as seen in retrospect, was a crisis long since overcome. It had destroyed London's old timber houses, which had been replaced by brick buildings lining widened streets.<sup>7</sup> With all its speedy destruction, it had, within less than a week, made thousands

homeless, yet it killed only a very few. It was even said to have been "erga vitas innocuum."<sup>8</sup> By 1720, the two disasters of 1665 and 1666 were certainly not on a par, for no reason could be given to minimize the dangers of the plague, which, lasting virtually nine months in 1665, had cost the lives of as many as 110,000 people.<sup>9</sup> Defoe, when writing his *Journal*, even believed that England was threatened with a new outbreak of the epidemic. Reports on the progress of the plague on the Continent had appeared in London newspapers since 1719,<sup>10</sup> and ever since 1720 Defoe himself had frequently dealt with the matter in *Applebee's Weekly Journal* and elsewhere (Backscheider 218-25).<sup>11</sup> In 1720, between forty and sixty thousand people had died of the plague in Marseilles alone (Backscheider ix).

Thus, apart from typological considerations, Defoe's choices and omissions of subject suggest a wide range of motives, including above all the topicality of the plague.

Yet, even the typological background of the plague would have deserved a larger canvas in the article under review. In dealing with the plague, Defoe was faced with a chorus of traditional voices to whom a typological view of the plague had always made solid good sense. Comparable to the fire in this respect, it had behind it the rich tradition of what Louis A. Landa calls "the wrath of God theory" (Backscheider 274). The cliché, it seems, was frequently referred to in 1665 as well as in the early 1720s. Nathaniel Hodges, mentioned in Defoe's *Journal*, is quoted as giving a list of the corresponding biblical imagery: the plague is the rod of the Almighty, who may "draw the Sword, bend the Bow, or shoot the Arrows of Death" (Backscheider 275).

If read in the light of Rosen's article, Landa's materials lead to the conclusion that the typology of the plague was a well-established and autonomous subject, which in order to preserve its momentum, hardly stood in need of the typological fire. In his analysis of the mockery episode, Rosen, wishing to emphasize the blasphemous wickedness of the mockers, rather surprisingly, states the matter himself:

. . . H. F. indicates that they stand outside his account of the plague which, fire or no fire, has its own typological bearings: the plague in itself is a manifestation of divine judgement. (270)

## III

In conclusion, I may add a remark on the relation between typology and realism (275). As Landa points out, physicians such as Sir Richard Blackmore and the earlier Nathaniel Hodges,<sup>12</sup> while claiming that the plague came from God, moved at the same time to the realistic position of the medical scientist (Backscheider 276). Similarly, in the *Journal*, Defoe refers both to the appointment of Providence and to the natural causes of the plague. So the eclipse of typological patterns, which, according to Rosen, seems based on Defoe's arrangement of subjects, may be more immediately due to the impact of rationalism on typology in general, or, as G. A. Starr puts it, in *Defoe and Casuistry*, to Defoe's attitude "at once rational and religious."<sup>13</sup>

Neither should Defoe's attitude take us by surprise. In preparing this reply to Alan Rosen's contribution, I came across the verdict of the parliamentary report on the causes of the Great Fire, summed up in a pregnant phrase: "The hand of God upon us, a great wind, and a season so very dry."<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form* in Robinson Crusoe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1966) 101.

<sup>2</sup>Everett Zimmerman, "H. F.'s Meditations: A *Journal of the Plague Year*," *PMLA* 87 (1972): 420-21, and *Defoe and the Novel* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975) 119. As identified in Defoe's *Journal*, however, typological interpretation may create some perplexities. Towards the end of the *Journal*, there is a passage whose "prophetic tone," according to Zimmerman, "suggests the apocalyptic": "But the Time was not fully come, that the City was to be purg'd by Fire, nor was it far off; for within Nine Months more I saw it all lying in Ashes" ("H. F.'s Meditations" 421). These lines seem to have suggested to Zimmerman precisely the typological referent which Defoe, in Rosen's view, has deactivated by refusing "to grant the Great Fire the status it has in his sources" (265).

<sup>3</sup>Paul Korshin, *Typologies in England 1650-1820* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>The traditional view that Thomas Vincent, *God's Terrible Voice in the City* (London, 1667) is to be numbered among Defoe's sources, in the technical sense of the term, has been rejected by F. Bastian, "Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* Reconsidered," *RES* 16 (1965): "There do not seem to be enough examples of possible borrowings to establish Vincent's book as a probable source" (163).

<sup>5</sup>See Gustav Milne, *The Great Fire of London* (Austin, TX: Historical Publications, 1986; rpt. New Barnet, 1990) 37.

<sup>6</sup>Milne (22-23) on the "Prophets of Doom."

<sup>7</sup>Milne 82.

<sup>8</sup>Inscription on the Monument.

<sup>9</sup>Modern estimate. See the *Museum of London* exhibits and comments on the Plague and the Great Fire.

<sup>10</sup>Paula R. Bakscheider, preface, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1992) ix. All subsequent references are to this edition ("Bakscheider").

<sup>11</sup>See Louis A. Landa on the idea of plague as "an abiding fact" in Defoe's consciousness (Bakscheider 270), as also his discussion of Defoe's *Due Preparations for the Plague, as well for Soul as Body*, which appeared about a month before the *Journal* (Bakscheider 271). The references are to Louis A. Landa, introduction, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (London: Oxford UP, 1969), rpt. as "Religion, Science and Medicine in *A Journal of the Plague Year*," Bakscheider 269-85.

<sup>12</sup>Sir Richard Blackmore, *A Discourse upon the Plague* (London, 1721). Hodges' Latin treatise on the plague of 1665 had been published in translation in 1720, recommending itself to the reader as it contained "precautionary Directions against the like Contagion" (Rosen 280, where no mention, however, is made of the prevalent fear of a new outbreak around 1720). Throughout the *Journal*, Defoe's narrator makes comments such as: "I cannot but remember to leave this Admonition upon Record, if ever such another dreadful Visitation should happen in this City" (Bakscheider 97).

<sup>13</sup>G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Casuistry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971) 80.

<sup>14</sup>See the *Museum of London* exhibits and comments on the Great Fire.