

## Selfhood in a Time of Crisis

*Cleo O'Callaghan Yeoman*

The unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 global pandemic and the effect that it has had upon people's daily lives is something that has remained relatively undisputed. Though in many ways a period of stagnation and of limitation, the past few months have likewise constituted a period of reaction and of adaptation, as individuals and nations have acted to reshape their lives according, and in response, to a new and evolving set of rules and regulations.

As observed in the rubric of this issue, this tradition of response to and within a crisis is not something that is without literary precedent, as demonstrated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and indeed Edmund Burke, respectively. Also not without its own precedent is plague literature; earlier this year, in an article for *The Guardian*, Marcel Theroux drew and applied parallels between various literary representations of the plagues and pandemics of past centuries to the situation in the UK at the time. With reference to Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Il Decameron*, Camus's twentieth-century *La Peste*, and, sitting between the two, Defoe's eighteenth-century *A Journal of the Plague Year* – first published in 1722 – Theroux suggests that “the primary lesson of plague literature, from Thucydides onwards, is how predictably humans respond to such crises.”<sup>1</sup> Such predictability within human behavior reinforces this sense of precedence, whilst, in keeping with the futuristic trajectory of his discussion, Theroux concludes by saying that “whether society changes for the better or worse, or simply stays the same, is what we will find out.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite providing a direct comparison with our own reality, these parallels are ultimately presented by Theroux as being more concerned with the fact of recurring outbreaks of disease – and with the logistics of these outbreaks – than they are with exploring the idea of human response and experience upon an individual level. Indeed, the significance of individual experience and the potential of the individual mind is something that has significantly shaped my own study and appreciation of the eighteenth century. It is also something that, having reflected upon the events and headlines of the past few months, stands out as being especially pertinent, as there develops a growing preoccupation with the self: self-isolation, self-education, self-sufficiency. In approaching, therefore, our current climate of change and of challenge from the perspective of eighteenth-century study, it is specifically upon the significance of the self that I propose to focus.

An emphasis upon the individual self is something that has been – and, in some cases, remains – intrinsic to the daily reality of the pandemic. It manifests itself in different ways, some of which are specific to the pandemic itself, others of which relate to separate, ongoing issues. Over the past few months, people have been instructed to self-isolate by staying at home, and in some cases have taken it upon themselves to become more self-sufficient, growing and producing their own food – not dissimilarly to Defoe’s eponymous Robinson Crusoe. In addition to the pandemic itself, however, the simultaneous occurrence of Black Lives Matter protests against the presence of systemic racism has resulted in greater emphasis being placed upon the importance of self-education. Indeed, one of the greatest messages to come specifically out of these demonstrations – in particular via the means of social media channels – is the idea that it is not enough simply to be not racist; one must instead be actively *anti-racist*, and take responsibility of one’s own self in order to become and remain so.

This emphasis upon self-responsibility and self-education is especially significant in demonstrating precisely that which was advocated by Immanuel Kant in his seminal, and inherently reactionary, essay “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’,” published in 1784. Stating that “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”<sup>3</sup> and that “Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another,”<sup>4</sup> Kant proceeds to suggest that having the “courage to use your *own* understanding! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, it becomes clear that what was deemed necessary during, and pertinent to, the eighteenth century by Kant remains necessary within and pertinent to our own present situation and society. The impetus that is placed upon the active engagement of the individual mind is in keeping with the notion of the past few months representing a period of adaptation, as it is through being presented with new challenges – as we are now ourselves – that individuals are crucially encouraged to engage with and exercise their own reason, judgement, and understanding.

Such a sentiment is further advocated – and, indeed, foreshadowed – by Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, published in 1767, in which he confirms people’s capacity for individual judgement and reason – essentially, for enlightenment – writing that man “is in some measure the artificer of his own frame, as well as of his fortune, and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive.”<sup>6</sup> In keeping with modern contemporary discourses, Ferguson is, moreover, critical of people’s reluctance to actively educate themselves and to strive to deepen their own understanding: “we become students and admirers, instead of rivals; and substitute the knowledge of books, instead of the inquisitive or animated spirit in which they were written.”<sup>7</sup>

Although rivalry – here contextualized by the pursuit of knowledge – is in no way the object of today’s unrest, Ferguson’s insistence upon the importance of pushing boundaries, and of exceeding limits in the name of improvement, is significant in that it may be applied to the imperative with which we are confronted today: that of being *anti-racist*. His suggestion that “new pretenders are rejected, not because they fall short of their predecessors, but because they do not excel them; or because in reality we have, without examination, taken for granted the merit of the first, and cannot judge of either” is, in particular, illustrative of this point, in highlighting the importance of examining and of judging situations for ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

It is thus through analyzing eighteenth-century presentations of the significance of the individual self, the exercise of individual understanding, and of self-education that we might comprehend and respond most effectively to the challenges of today. Although, as observed by Henry Home, Lord Kames, “Nature...designed us for society,” it is important not to forget the significance of the individual during times of crisis, as it is through individual enlightenment that we improve both ourselves and, by extension, society.<sup>9</sup> In understanding, moreover, enlightenment as an inherently reactionary process, we may hopefully – as students of the eighteenth century, and in the word of Ferguson – “excel” and come to view the current crises with which we are faced as ones to which we are uniquely positioned to respond, and as a catalytic opportunity through which to adapt and progress. As Theroux observes, the full extent of the lasting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic upon society remains to be seen; what is clear to see, however, is the enduring relevance of eighteenth-century portrayals of the individual self, to our own, twenty-first century reality. As Ferguson aptly writes: “the desire of public safety, is, at all times, a powerful motive of conduct.”<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Theroux, “The end of coronavirus: what plague literature tells us about our future”, *The Guardian*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/01/the-end-of-coronavirus-what-plague-literature-tells-us-about-our-future>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, ed. Paul Hyland (London: Routledge, 2003), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Ferguson. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Dublin: Printed by Boulter Grierson (1767), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 325.

<sup>9</sup> Home, Henry. *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion. In Two Parts*. Edinburgh: Printed by R. Fleming, for A. Kincaid and A. Donaldson (1751),16.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, 316.