The Solitary, the Sick, and the Dead:  
A Study of Bodily Figures in Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*  

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In *Imagining the Penitentiary* (1987), an influential study of the novel in its rise, John Bender points out a set of material and technological features adopted in the planning of the penitentiary as an ideological backdrop to the novel’s developing structure. In chiming with Foucault’s analysis of the way the prison architecture and regimes operate on the body of inmates, Bender asserts that the novel employs distinct spatial and temporal elements in shaping the arena of human experience, culminating in the fiction of self-identity:

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The realist novel and the penitentiary are literary and social systems that represent the fiction of self conceived as real, on these empiricist terms, through mistaken but imaginatively persuasive resemblance. To manipulate identity by recomposing the fictions on which it is founded is the exact aim of the penitentiary as an institution. (38)

This view that aligns the novel and the penitentiary into the fiction of self-identity turns on the notion of environmental determinism. In other words, this fiction calls for a set of concrete material circumstances as its condition of possibility.

So in ‘tell[ing] the story of the materially constructed self’ (Bender 38), the novel creates a prosaic world mired in material concerns of life, one that is graspable within the verifiable scope of human experience. In determining this scope of experience, John Locke refers to certain cognizable, measurable bounds of human understanding: ‘If we can find out those measures, whereby a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending thereon, we need not to be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge’ (31). As well attested in Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, one of the most telling attributes of the novel is its illustration of temporal and spatial specificities as a vital backdrop to human experience, means by which it gains its realist effect: ‘The characters of the novel can only be individualized if they are set in a background of particular time and place’ (21). Likewise, prison regimes primarily hinge on regulatory spatial-temporal arrangements with which to shape and reproduce certain behavioral patterns imposed on inmates. If the novel is organized by a set of material conditions with which to justify different character traits and behaviors, the penitentiary uses the same idea for designing regimes of moral discipline.

Underlying these patterns of environmental determinism is the notion that representation determines our perception of reality, a theoretical point at which both novelists and prison reformists converge in their efforts to capture the real in